

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE
STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office, by Frank Tonkay.

No. 91.

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Price 5 Cents.



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No. 91.

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THE RED HOUSE;

OR,

The Mystery of Dead Man's Bluff.

BY JAS. C. MERRITT.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEAD MAN.

"No, Jerry, I would not go near it."

"Why?"

"Because the house I believe to be haunted."

"Oh, nonsense! Don't old Sol Barksdale live there?"

"Well, what if he does? He's a miser, as everybody says, and some believe he's a wizard."

"A wizard! Why, Henry Larkmore! Ha! ha! ha! That's a good one."

"Well, now, you can just laugh as much as you please, but those who have passed the house after dark have heard unearthly sounds and seen unearthly sights. The Red House is a place everybody in the village avoids."

"Well, Henry, you people who live in this out-of-the-way village have a deal more superstition than I gave you credit for."

"But, Jerry, suppose you were passing a lone red house on the bluff where nobody but this crooked old Sol lived; suppose you were to hear yells that were ten times louder than a human voice and see every window in the house lit up in a second by the whitest, clearest light you ever saw—just such a glare as sometimes may be faintly seen above the graveyards, what the school teacher calls phosphorescence—and you could hear chains jingle, blows of iron and curses that would make your blood run cold, what would you do?"

"Do! I'd walk right in and see what was the row."

"Well, I guess you wouldn't."

"Try me and see."

The speakers were two youths of about seventeen and eighteen years of age. Each carried on his shoulder a fowling piece and a game pouch slung about him.

They were in the large strip of forest, abounding with game, which skirted the river.

Henry Larkmore lived in the village of Millbrook, and Jerry Blackman had come out to pay him a visit. Jerry lived in one of the great cities of the East, but had been attending Harvard University for the past three years.

This was vacation for him and he had come to Millbrook to spend it with his former schoolmate, Henry.

The boys had had a very fair day's sport, as the well-filled game bags could testify.

They were on their way home and but a short distance from what had always been known as the Red House on the Bluff.

The Red House had long been a mystery to the good people of Millbrook.

The inhabitants hardly knew whether to term the place haunted or bewitched.

Old Barksdale was a fair representative of Hertzoff, the necromancer of the Black Crook. He could very easily be imagined to be a wizard or one who dealt only with the dark and mysterious.

He was reputed to be familiar with the black art by the more superstitious, but only supposed to be a crabbed old miser by the more intelligent inhabitants of Millbrook.

Nick Blumer, a carpenter, who had made some repairs on the Red House, said that the walls were covered with the most weird, most singular pictures mortal man ever beheld.

There were pictures there, Nick declared, with eyes so human you could see them sparkle.

He said they smiled and grinned at him in a most hideous manner from the dark walls, but the moment he approached them they became only paintings on canvas.

The Red House was a very large old-fashioned structure, which had stood time out of mind on the bluff. It was made of a peculiar red granite indigenous to the neighborhood.

Its present occupant was but little seen in the village and was reputed to live alone. When he made rare visits to the village he never talked about himself or how he lived.

He was supposed to possess untold treasures in his house on the bluff.

The house was situated only about fifty feet from the edge of the bluff, in the midst of a grove of poplar, cedar and fir trees.

Whether these trees had been planted or were a natural growth, no one knew to a certainty. They had been there ever since the house had been built, and that was long before the oldest inhabitant of Millbrook was born.

There were but five acres of land connected with the Red House, and all of this was surrounded by a stone wall about four feet high, with an iron picket fence on top.

This wall ran on the edge of the bluff, one hundred feet above the river which flowed below.

The whole had about it an appearance of great age. The trees were large, almost gigantic. The rocks and boulders, which were strewn about the yard, were black and covered with moss.

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The whole had about it an appearance of great age. The trees were large, almost gigantic. The rocks and boulders, which were strewn about the yard, were black and covered with moss.

Some care had been used by the occupant as to the place. He had the trees trimmed, he had the lawn mowed, but only once a year.

The place usually wore a deserted and somewhat neglected appearance.

How old Sol, as he was called, employed his time no one knew.

He was inside his house most of the time. The few curious visitors who had ventured inside the lawn (the front gate was frequently left open) seldom saw him.

Some said that the interior of this house was a workshop; that he was always busy at a forge or anvil, doing no one knew what.

Some man, a wag of the village, suggested that he was making flies under the employ and supervision of the arch enemy of man.

All this was rumor, and no one put much confidence in it.

It was just dusk when the two boys arrived at the place where the two paths in the forest separated, one going direct to Millbrook and the other by the Red House on the bluff.

"Let's go by it," said Jerry.

"What, the Red House?" asked Henry.

"Yes."

"Not much, this late."

"Why, Henry, are you afraid?"

"Well, I don't know what you might call it," said Henry, with something very like a shudder, "but I don't care about going near the Red House after dark."

"I tell you, I've a curiosity to see the place," said Jerry.

"Well, you'd better take daylight for it."

"No. I'm going to see it by night."

"Well, Jerry, you'll have to go alone."

"Why?"

"I'm going the direct road to Millbrook."

"Ha! ha! ha, Henry, I declare I believe you are turning coward."

Henry shrugged his shoulders and after a moment's reflection answered:

"You can form your own opinion o' me, Jerry. I don't want to form the acquaintance o' the proprietor o' that branch office of Hades after night. The fact is, I want to go home."

"Well, if you won't go with me, I'll go alone," said Jerry, with a laugh, as he started down the dark, narrow path which led by the famous Red House.

Jerry whistled a merry tune, just as boys do when they pass graveyards after night. He was not afraid, no, not he, yet he quickened his step when he came near the place and was prepared to hurry by.

Henry, his companion, had gone on to the village and he was alone.

Although Jerry would not admit that he was in the least frightened, yet he could not account for the wild thumping of his heart, as if it would break through its walls.

The great Red House at last loomed up, surrounded by its dark stone walls and forest trees. The gables looked quaint and ghost-like, with a small light burning in each.

Suddenly the air was rent with a most terrific shriek.

"Traitor!" came a hissing voice, right either from the house or lawn, Jerry could not tell which.

"Help, help, help!" came a cry.

"Die!"

"Oh, God!" groaned Jerry, and the frightened boy sank down underneath the stone fence.

It seemed to him at this moment the whole place was lighted up by a glare far more brilliant than the fiercest rays of the sun.

The scene was terrible.

Through a crevice in the rock composing the stone fence Jerry caught a glimpse of gigantic figures with horrid masks, dancing and struggling about.

There were long flashing daggers in their hands and the yells they uttered were bloodcurdling.

A crouched, cowering form was seen running about.

"Pardon—pardon!" came the wailing tones, and an old man with long white locks fell on his knees at the feet of one of the dark robed monsters.

"No—die!"

"Mercy, mercy!"

"Die!" was hissed in a most unnatural voice.

There was a rush and the cowering wretch seized. Daggers glittered in the strange light.

There was a shriek and all was darkness. Those brilliant lights had expired instantaneously with a blow and a groan.

A moment later and Jerry heard something like the fall of a heavy body and all was silent as the grave.

The Red House seemed just the same as usual. There was no change; it remained dark and gloomy.

Jerry waited for a few moments and then began to creep along the path which led past the house to the village.

When opposite the gate he stumbled over some object; stooping, he felt to his horror a dead body still warm and bleeding from numerous stabs.

With a cry of horror, the boy ran with all his strength to the village, where he told (as soon as he recovered breath and courage to do so), that there was a dead man on the bluff, in front of the Red House.

CHAPTER II.

A HAUNTED HOUSE.

The village of Millbrook was all excitement at the strange story Jerry Blackman had to tell.

"Did ye say a murder had been done there?" Nick Blumer asked.

"Yes."

"Who was killed?"

"I don't know, but think it was the old man himself."

"Old Sol Barksdale?"

Jerry nodded and trembled as he thought of his late terrible experience.

"I don't think old Nick kin spare him for awhile," said Blumer.

The boy was in the barroom of the village tavern, surrounded by an eager and excited group.

"There's no murder in it," said Henry Larkmore, who had now come up. "It's jest the way things been goin' on there all the time."

"Wasn't you with him, Henry?" asked the landlord.

"No."

"Why, I thought you two went out together?"

"So we did. We've been hunting all day together, but when we came back Jerry wanted to come round by the house, but I concluded I'd come the straight road home."

"How did it all happen?" asked Nick Blumer of Jerry, who was somewhat recovered.

Jerry then, in as few words as possible, stated what he had seen and heard.

"How many persons did you see about the Red House?"

"Five or six figures, though none of them looked like men, save the man who was killed."

"What were they, then?"

"Demons."

"They're wraiths, ghosts, goblins," said Neil Otis, the village blacksmith.

"I don't think anybody is killed," said the landlord.

"Nevertheless, it would be well enough to look into the matter a little," answered the village squire, who, among others, had been attracted to the tavern to hear the boy's story.

"Oh, of course, of course," said Nick Blumer; "it must be looked into, but there is no need of any hurry about it. It is, beyond a doubt, some practical joke old Sol has been playing."

"In the morning will be plenty of time," said Patton, the constable.

"Oh, yes," said Blumer, "nobody would be idiot enough to go up there to-night; I'll insure you that you will find old Sol all right in the morning, and when questioned concerning this freak, he will say that there was nothing of the kind."

"If he could sleep through such horrid sounds as I heard he would rival the seven sleepers," said Jerry.

The boy did not feel altogether pleasant at the manner in which the villagers were inclined to make sport of his terror.

He offered to head an expedition and return to the Red House.

"The dead man is there," he said. "You will find him on the bluff near the house."

"As no one lives there but old Sol," said Nick, "and as he couldn't be pulled out o' his house at this hour with a yoke o' oxen, I guess the dead body will stay there until morning."

It was agreed that at dawn the constable, squire and others should go up to the Red House on the bluff and see what could be discovered.

Long before dawn a dozen men, and among them the boys, Henry and Jerry, were at the tavern waiting to go up on the bluff.

"Let's go," said Nick Blumer, impatiently.

"So say I," put in Neil Otis, the blacksmith. "It's no use waiting here for day to dawn. Let's go right on."

The others were just as impatient.

The squire cast a glance at the eastern sky, which was be-

coming streaked with the dawn, and said he knew no reason for waiting longer.

"Go ahead, then," said Nick, nodding to Jerry. "Show us your corpse."

Jerry started, followed by the others, who chaffed him all the way up the hill.

The Red House was almost a mile from the village, and being rather out of the way, was seldom visited. There were those who lived in Millbrook who had never heard of the rumored wild orgies carried on almost nightly at the place.

Millbrook River ran past the village and made a bend, leaving the Red House on a kind of a promontory.

It was still dark and the eyes of the men full of sleep as they began to climb the long slope.

The group was silent, save an occasional word spoken by Nick Blumer to Jerry.

"Go ahead, my boy," he said, "show us yer goblin and we'll make mince-meat of him."

"You will see soon enough for your own nerves," said Jerry.

The great house, with its quaint gables, now loomed up to view. How somber and gloomy in the cold gray twilight it looked.

A chill seemed to come over every heart and each man involuntarily paused when the house burst into view.

For only a moment did they stand and gaze in awe upon the great pile and then at a word from the squire they moved on.

"Now where is it?" asked Nick, in a whisper, as they reached the crest of the hill and paused at one corner of the stone wall fence.

"There," said Jerry, pointing along the path.

Every eye was turned in the direction indicated by the youth's finger.

Sure enough, there in the cold, gray twilight, wet with dew, lay an object.

A dark, ghostly object.

For a moment the men paused terror-stricken. Then the squire, who was the oldest, advanced toward it.

It was a man who lay just as he had evidently fallen upon his face. The magistrate turned him over on his back and said:

"Why, it's old Sol himself."

"Murdered?"

"Yes, murdered."

"Well, who could have done it?"

That was a query. A mystery too deep to be fathomed in a moment.

A theory was soon formed. Robbers had attacked the miser's house and stabbed the old man just as Jerry was passing. That he, possessed with a wild terror, had fled to the gate, where he fell across the path the young hunter was forced to come.

They gathered around the dead body and waited until the sun came up and then went in the house.

Here they found the utmost confusion. Chairs were upset and a few drops of blood discovered on the carpet, which confirmed the theory that the fatal blow had been given in the house.

The boys Jerry and Henry found the walls lined with pictures, as Nick Blumer had stated.

The paintings were principally portraits containing the busts of men and Henry declared that he saw the eyes of one blink. But upon close inspection he could not but admit that it was nothing but a very neatly painted portrait.

One wing of the house extended back to the bluff and the window opening out to the river was raised.

There was a rope fastened to a portion of the window and let down quite to the water's edge.

"Without a doubt the murderers escaped by the window," said the squire.

A search showed that the house had been plundered of everything valuable, but no further trace of the murderer could be found.

An inquest was held on the dead body and a verdict by the jury returned as dark and mysterious as the murder itself.

Old Sol Barksdale was buried and the house closed up.

A week passed and one night Nick Blumer, chancing to pass the Red House, was attracted by a singular light burning from each of its quaint gables.

"What in the name o' tar and feathers does it mean?" he asked himself.

Suddenly the entire house was lighted up as if by magic and the most terrific shrieks and groans rent the air.

Every window seemed ablaze with a light, white and far more brilliant than the sun. For a single moment the terrified Nick gazed on the wonderful spectacle and fled.

The house was haunted—he was sure of it, and, taking a few friends in his confidence, he told them what he had seen.

Patton, the constable, and Otis, the blacksmith, agreed to watch the haunted house with him. The next night they were there, but nothing transpired. A second and third night passed without anything more than ordinary being discovered.

But on the fourth night the house, from cellar to garret, was suddenly lit up with that awful unearthly glare, and shrieks, so horrible as to almost freeze their blood, filled the air.

For a moment the trio stood petrified and then Nick Blumer drew his revolver. The others snatched their pistols also.

Seized by a wild frenzy, the three men discharged each a shot into the house.

"Charge," shouted Nick, and all three dashed pell mell forward in the darkness. The mysterious light had disappeared at the report of the first pistol and when the house was reached it was deserted and dark as a dungeon.

"The place is haunted," said the constable. "Let's leave the accursed ground, for we are in the land of the immortal."

They lost no time in making tracks back toward the village.

CHAPTER III.

LIVING PICTURES.

The murder at the Red House, or the the mystery of Dead Man's Bluff, as it was termed, drove the officers of the neighboring towns and cities almost frantic.

Harry Grinell was a young detective, who had already won a considerable reputation. He was a member of Allen Pinkerton's force and was despatched westward to solve the mystery which was driving the good people of Millbrook wild.

Harry was a daring young fellow, not to exceed twenty-five or six years of age, but one who had had a world of experience in dealing with criminals.

He could be relied on for courage and shrewdness and there was no man on the force who had a clearer head than he.

Harry pretended to have come to Millbrook on entirely different business from that which was his real object.

He put up at the tavern and announced to the landlord that he intended to stay a few days and look about. Village landlords are not good at keeping secrets and first-class at jumping at conclusions.

Almost instantly every villager knew that the young stranger was a speculator or a manufacturer, who had come to Millbrook with the intention of starting some sort of a manufacturing establishment.

On the evening after his arrival he was standing on the porch of the tavern when the great stage coach rolled in.

"There may be something here to begin with," thought the detective. "I will see."

The only person who alighted was a young lady strangely beautiful, with large dark-gray eyes, beautifully arched eyebrows and dark hair.

She cast an eager look about and then came directly forward to where young Grinell stood.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said, in a voice whose sweet music seemed to thrill the soul of the young detective. "Are you the landlord?"

"No, miss, only a guest," said the detective. Anxious to be of service, he added: "I will call the landlady if you wish."

"This is Millbrook, is it not?" she asked.

"Yes, miss."

"Oh, then I must be right; but he promised to meet me here, and why has he not come?"

"Who are you expecting, miss?" asked the young detective, somewhat eagerly.

"My—my father," she answered somewhat hesitatingly. "Has he been here?"

"What is his name?—though, perhaps, you had better consult with the landlord, as I am almost a stranger."

Harry determined to know the name of this strange guest, and once more proposed to go for the landlord.

"You may, if you please," said the young girl, who seemed to be pausing between two desires. One, to re-enter the stage, the other to remain at the tavern.

Just as Harry turned to enter the house for the landlord that worthy came out.

"Is my father here?" the girl asked.

"What is the name?" asked the landlord.

"Daily—Lemuel Daily."

"Not yet, but perhaps he will come if you will wait."

"Is this Mr. Butts' tavern?"

"It is; Nathan Butts'."

"Are you Mr. Butts?"

"I am."

"Then I guess I will stay. He told me to wait here for him, if he did not meet me."

The keen eye of the shrewd detective had observed strange glances passing between old Nathan Butts and his young guest, yet he paid but little attention to it at that time.

The landlord showed the young lady to her room and then came out to tell the stage drivers there was no one to go away that day.

The stage rolled off up the hill and the landlord and our hero were left alone on the long porch in front of the tavern.

"What large house is that up on the bluff?" Harry asked.

The landlord glanced at him keenly for a moment before answering. There was something peculiar in that glance and Harry could not at the time understand it.

The landlord recovered himself almost instantly and said:

"That's the Red House on Dead Man's Bluff."

"Why do you call it Dead Man's Bluff?" asked Harry, with a perfect innocence and unconcern in his manner.

"It is because the owner of the house was killed there a few weeks ago."

"Who lives there now?"

"No one."

"Who killed the owner?"

"That's a mystery, sir, we can't none o' us solve," and the landlord, who seemed somewhat reticent on the subject, retired in the house to attend to his affairs.

Harry wandered about the village and finally dropped into a saloon.

There were a few customers at the bar and over their glasses they were discussing the very subject which interested the detective most.

"I tell ye, the place is ha'nted," said one who, by his flushed face and watery eyes, was evidently half intoxicated.

"Ha'nted? How d'ye know?" asked another.

"'Cos I've come by there o' nights and I heerd jest sich screamin' and yellin' and seen sich sights as never mortal eyes beheld afore."

"Well, now, warn't them sights seen and them sounds heerd afore old Sol was killed?"

"Yes."

"Didn't never anybody go in to see what it was?"

"No; Nick Blumer an' some o' 'em tried to once, but it was all gone the minnit they started toward the house."

Harry Grinell thought that he might gain some information as to the mystery of the Red House and paused at the bar to listen to what the men were saying. They observed the presence of a stranger and became silent, perhaps out of respect for him.

"I beg your pardon," said the detective, carelessly, "but I am somewhat interested in this story you are telling. Do not let my presence interrupt you."

The narrator was still silent and looked somewhat grim.

"Will you not have something, gentlemen?" said the detective to the crowd, hoping to win their favor.

The face of the narrator brightened in a moment. They were not the boys to refuse. After treating a time or two, Harry gradually drew the narrator to one side by a shrewd, mild conversation.

"What is all this about the haunted Red House and the mystery of Dead Man's Bluff?" he finally asked, when he and the villager were seated at a small, round table, with a bottle and glasses between them.

"Well, sir," said the man, who was mellow enough to become strictly confidential, "it's a regular devil's hole. Satan and all his imps come up there o' nights to hold high carnival. Don't go near it."

"Why?"

"Men has gone there as never come back. It's all a mystery which we can't explain and some o' 'em people say it's best not to talk about it, but men disappeared there before old Sol was killed."

"Is that so?"

"It is, stranger. They say as how they've got pictur's an' things there which to look at yer sure to drop dead. Then ye kin sometimes hear a woman yell in distress, and when ye go to help her, why it's in a further part o' the house, then yer tolled on and on, until at last ye jist drop right down into the pit o' fire an' brimstone itself."

Harry knew that these stories were greatly exaggerated. There might be some foundation to them, but in the main they were false.

"Who tells these stories?" he asked.

"Everybody."

"Everybody? Did you ever see a man who had seen the interior of the house?"

"I've seen it myself."

"Will you give me a description of it?"

"In course I will," and then he proceeded to give as complete a description of the house as he could.

Harry paid particular attention to what he said, storing up the knowledge for future use.

The next day he set out for the Red House. He never informed any one of his design, for Harry Grinell seldom told any one of his designs.

On reaching the house, he found the gate closed, but not locked. He paused a few moments and gazed up at the gloomy old building. It was certainly not prepossessing in appearance.

"Well, if there is a place on earth which is haunted, I would say it was this spot," said Harry, walking toward the great front door. "I wonder if it is locked?"

He tried the great hall door and found it locked, but he had provided himself for such a contingency. Drawing some skeleton keys, he was not long in finding one which fitted the lock.

Throwing back the bolt, he pushed the door open and entered.

There was a noise from within the building, like the scampering of many feet.

"Rats," said the detective, who struck his cane upon the floor to see if he could hear them again.

He passed down a long hall with rooms upon each side.

"I wonder where the wonderful art gallery is?" he said, as he stood gazing at the various doors.

He tried first one door and then another without effect. All were locked, but by the use of his skeleton keys he was enabled to open them. He felt the close, bad air rush in his face as he opened one after another.

At last he came to a long room, and, on glancing in, saw that its walls were covered with pictures. There were rare paintings and grand old portraits of by-gone generals, statesmen and celebrities.

The room was dark and in order to get a better view, Harry stepped to a window and threw open a shutter.

A flood of light streamed in.

"Old Sol must have had a mania for pictures," said the young detective, as he gazed in amazement on them. "He could not have been so much of a miser after all, for he has a perfect wealth of pictures. He must have been something of a hermit instead of a miser."

There were four large portraits, life-size, which seemed so life-like as to completely fascinate him.

They were merely the heads and busts of the men, showing the shoulders and part of the arms.

"Wonderful, wonderful," said the young man, standing before the portraits. "Those eyes look as if they might be living. These must be the wonderful pictures I heard about. What? As I live, I thought I saw that eye sparkle. Can it be only a painting?"

He seemed to feel an uneasiness about him as he gazed on those pictures.

"Great God!" he gasped, "that eye did certainly move." He took a step forward.

Instantly four pairs of arms seemed to be drawn out from the four portraits, four pairs of hands were extended from the paintings, and eight cocked revolvers were simultaneously leveled at his breast.

CHAPTER IV.

"CHOOSE YOUR DEATH."

"Great heaven!" was the only ejaculation which escaped the lips of the daring young detective.

He dropped his cane to the floor and the rattle seemed so hollow, so awful, that he could almost believe himself in a living tomb.

Standing there before the four portraits, now living realities, and each holding a pair of deadly pistols on him, it is no wonder that he trembled with fear and astonishment.

What devil's device was this? Into whose hands had he fallen and how would it all end?

His revolver was in his hip pocket and he thought to grasp it and sell his life as dearly as possible, but the four pictures seemed to read his design, and in concert, as one voice, they said:

"Make no move to defend yourself, for if you do, at that moment you shall surely die."

"What shall I do?" he gasped, addressing the inquiry more to himself than to any one else. But those living paintings heard him, and again in concert answered:

"Surrender without a struggle if you would live."

Behind the detective stood a large piece of statuary. He had glanced at it upon entering and duly observed that it was life-size, or perhaps larger than life-size.

Now, to his surprise and horror, the statue actually descended from the block of stone on which it had apparently stood for centuries and walked across the floor and disarmed him.

"Great God! what horrid hole is this I am in," groaned the detective, "that paintings hold revolvers and statuary walks?" He did not notice that the statuary was only a hard kind of paper, doubtless hollow, inside of which was a man.

Harry Grinell was brave as a lion, and had he been confronted by half a dozen ordinary mortals he would have sold his life dearly, and died before he would have surrendered. But this was such an amazing surprise. To find oil paintings assume life-like appearance, to speak and threaten him with death, was enough to confuse and unman the best.

Then that a piece of statuary, apparently solid stone, should become life-like and walk, no wonder he was unnerved.

The hair upon the head of our friend seemed to start up on end. He was more amazed than frightened.

His limbs seemed powerless and he was as motionless as if he had suddenly become petrified.

While standing thus a coil of rope, seeming to drop from the ceiling, fell about his shoulders, pinioning his arms completely at his side. The hand that threw the rope was invisible and he was a pinioned prisoner before he knew it.

By some strange movement of the cord thrown about him, his arms were drawn down close about his body, and he found them drawn behind him and held so firmly that he was immovable.

Then the arms which held the revolvers were slowly and carefully drawn back into the canvas. In fact, they seemed to fade away until nothing but the canvas remained.

Never were more harmless or natural portrait paintings seen than those upon the wall.

The detective would have believed it all a dream had not his hands been so firmly bound behind him, that he fully realized he was a prisoner in reality.

Curiosity impelled him to gaze on those paintings. They were real paintings and he could not see where those arms holding the deadly revolvers came from. The eyes, which a moment before had sparkled with life and hatred, were only paintings. The lips which had moved and spoken such terrible threats, were only lines drawn on canvas with pencil and brush.

The statuary was motionless as stone and he could hardly believe that he had seen it walk like a living being.

Even as he stood wondering, looking, doubting and fearing, the floor began to sink beneath him.

Slowly and surely it went down, down, down, carrying him with it until he had sunk fully two feet, when he found himself suspended. The floor glided away out of sight and he swung over a dark pit beneath. There seemed no bottom to it and he felt himself lowered down, down, down, until the room above, with its wonderful living pictures and statuary, was out of sight.

He was in utter darkness. Down, down, down he descended, not rudely, as if falling, but slowly and carefully, as if the main object was to secure him without injury.

What were the thoughts that surged the mind of the detective? We can only surmise, dear reader, and leave you to the same. It is beyond the powers of the pen to describe.

His heart seemed to stand still, and as he swung suspended in the darkness, with naught but blackness above and below, the very air seemed impregnated with the presence of demons.

He struggled until he found that it was useless, when he became motionless. Suspended by the body, he was let down until he rested on a platform. Then the ropes seemed unhooked from above by unseen hands. The floor above glided back to its place, and he was bound, helpless and appeared to be on a kind of car.

There was a rolling sound of wheels as he was drawn away somewhere, he did not know where. The very atmosphere was full of mystery. All was darkness.

Oh, horror of horrors!

Phosphorescent lights flitted before his eyes and upon the walls of what appeared to be a long, dark tunnel hung grinning skeletons.

He seemed on a sort of car and was being pushed or drawn at a tolerably lively rate of speed.

Soon his eyes saw a light in the distance. One of those peculiar red lights, seen only in mines or underground tunnels. Then before him loomed up the form of a man. He was gigantic in size and wore a horrid mask on his face. It was the head of a lion, and, in fact, he seemed a lion standing erect. In one paw-like hand he held a long spear, while on his head was a burning lamp, used by miners, which is fastened in the hat.

At his waist was a belt which bristled with revolvers.

Another and another of these horrid sentries was passed. Each was disguised and masked as some ferocious animal and each bore in his hand the long spear and upon his head the lamp.

Day and night were the same in the cavern of eternal darkness.

"How will this end?" the detective asked himself.

It could end but one way and that in his death.

Suddenly the car stopped before a door. In the passage where it stopped all was darkness, yet his eyes having become partially accustomed to it, he could make out the outlines of some figures near.

The door was suddenly thrown open and the prisoner felt himself pushed forward, feet foremost, into a room which was ablaze with light. For a few moments he was compelled to keep his eyes closed, so brilliant was the light.

"Lift him to his feet!" said a stern, deep voice.

He felt himself raised to his feet.

As soon as he became accustomed to the light he opened his eyes and gazed about him.

He was shocked and well he might be.

Before him, standing or sitting about on peculiarly carved chairs, were the most hideous forms he had ever seen in his life.

No masquerade was ever gotten up on such a wonderful idea of the grotesque and ugly.

There was nothing beautiful or gentle about any of the characters assumed—all were ugly and ferocious.

Two sentries with masks of tiger's heads and tiger skins upon their bodies were on guard at the door.

A man reclining on a sort of a sofa was disguised as a lion, having a lion skin upon his body.

Then came leopards, panthers, vultures and crocodiles.

Each was armed and a deadly fury seemed to burn from the eyes of every monster.

"Well, sir," said the man or creature upon the sofa, "what have you to say?"

Knowing the question to be addressed to himself, the detective answered:

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"No, sir; not a thing."

"Why are you here?"

The few moments given the detective for consideration had not been wasted. He had in another instant recovered his presence of mind and was himself again. Shrewd and keen, the detective was under ordinary circumstances more than a match for the most desperate criminal in America; but now he was helpless.

"I am not here at my own desire," said the detective, somewhat disconsolately.

"What brought you here?"

"I do not know."

"You lie, you scoundrel!" cried the monstrosity, starting up from the couch on which he reclined.

"I do not."

"What brought you here?"

"It seemed to be ropes and a car, but whether by the agency of man or devil I cannot say."

"You cannot, so we don't want to know that. What brought you to this house?"

The detective was stumped. He dared not admit the motive which had impelled him to come.

"I came as a matter of curiosity," he finally said.

"You are lying again, sir. Some other motive."

"I had heard that the Red House was haunted. There was a mystery about Dead Man's Bluff which I wanted to solve."

"You still lie. But it makes no difference. You are in the dragon's cave and no one who enters it has been permitted to escape alive."

The detective sighed.

"Well you may sigh, sir. You shall die and now you shall have ten minutes to choose your mode of death."

To the intense surprise of our hero, the goblins seemed to float away until the room was empty, and then those white unearthly lights gradually faded out, leaving him alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER V.

MISS MARTHA'S LOVERS.

All Millbrook, living in peaceful ignorance of the horrors perpetrated within a mile of the village, seemed smiling and happy.

Mr. Jippy Jerkum, a young attorney of the place and brother of the judge, was all smiles as he walked down to his office on the morning after Harry Grinell had fallen into the hands of those monsters at the Red House.

Mr. Jerkum was about thirty-four or five years of age, though he claimed that he was only twenty-seven. He was about five feet eight inches in height, with dark hair flecked with gray, dark brown eyes, reddish face, Roman nose and brown mustache and whiskers, very short, as though the soil on which they grew was unproductive.

He was constantly twirling his mustache and plucking at his whiskers. Jippy, as his brother the judge called him, was a great favorite at Millbrook. He was regarded as being pre-eminently smart and said to be making money hand over fist.

It was a delightful morning and the dandy lawyer, with short coat and tight pantaloons, and immense boots on immense feet, walked leisurely to his office.

There was a smile on his red dish-shaped face and his eyes, reddened with stimulants, glistened like those of a boiled fish.

Mr. Jerkum was intensely satisfied with himself. He had accomplished some wonderful scheme and was gloating over his triumph.

He reached his office, which he entered. The office had been swept and everything put in order by the colored man long before the aristocratic, dish-faced, beard-plucking attorney entered it.

"Well, I hope Daily will be here," said the lawyer. "I kind a like the looks of that girl and, by Ned, I think I'll make her mine."

At this moment the colored man who swept the office of the Millbrook lawyer, entered and said:

"Gemmen to see ye, mars'r."

"Then let him in, you black scoundrel," cried the favorite of Millbrook, taking his feet from the desk and placing his hands behind his head. "I wish niggers were slaves yet," he added, after the negro was gone. "It's handy to have 'em to cuss."

In a few moments a man, rather past middle age, entered the office.

"Hello, Lem Daily, glad to see ye," said the attorney, extending his hand lazily and grasping the stranger's. "Be seated."

"How's everything runnin'?" asked Daily.

"Oh, about so so."

"Much business?"

"No, not a great deal."

"S'pose you have a deal ready?"

"Oh, yes," said the attorney, with a strange smile and a wink. "We have a large amount of goods on hand whenever a buyer calls for them."

"You mean here, of course?" said the visitor, with a laugh, as he touched his forehead.

"Of course," and the lawyer laughed as heartily as his visitor.

Lem Daily was nearly, if not quite, fifty years of age. He had short, iron gray whiskers and a countenance not handsome nor ugly, yet possessing something which would certainly be called disagreeable.

For a moment the two men sat and gazed into each other's eyes. They were without doubt reading each other's minds.

"By the way, Lem?" said the lawyer, after a moment's silence.

"Well, Jippy, what is it?"

"That's a pretty girl of yours."

"Yes," said Lem, with a long, deep drawn breath. "Martha is a girl any father might be proud of."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jippy. "Well, by Ned, you are the cheekiest fellow I ever saw."

"You never had much of a fancy for looking in the glass, then, I reckon," said Daily, with a grin upon his peculiarly hard features.

"Well, I have a few times, and there——"

"You saw what?"

"A perfect gentleman, sir."

"Well, now, that's cheek sublime."

"But, by Ned, Lem, I don't want to change the subject," said Jippy. "I have been over to see your daughter and I like her."

"You do?"

"Yes; she's as pretty as a picture and I want her."

"But suppose I have other designs for Martha——"

"You'll have to lay them aside. By Ned, she shall be mine!" cried Jippy, his dark expressive eyes glistening with a strange, dangerous fire.

The short, stout man with dark checked clothes, who sat before him, turned his eyes upon the lounge.

"I mean it, by Ned, I mean it!" said Jippy.

Still the man was silent.

"Why do you hesitate to say yes, Lem?" asked the lawyer.

"I think you can be gratified and still Martha made to answer my other purposes."

"What are they?"

Lem looked carefully about the room, and then, approaching until his lips were almost at the lawyer's ear, Daily whispered so softly that no one even at a few feet could have heard him, let alone being outside the room.

"Well, I suppose that would be all right, but, by Ned, I want the girl in the end."

Mr. Daily made no answer, but sat for some time gazing out of the office window.

The person about whom they were speaking was the young lady who had come on the stage to Millbrook to meet her father.

Martha Daily was, in fact, creating quite a sensation at the village.

"Have you seen her yet, Jerry?" asked Henry Larkmore.

"Who? The beauty up at old Butts' tavern?"

"Yes."

"You bet I have," Jerry Blackman said.

"She's a daisy."

"Well, now, ain't she sweet?"

"She's lovely."

"A darling."

The boys were in the room of Henry Larkmore at the house of the latter's father.

"I'm afraid we'll fall out over that girl and break the long friendship between us," said Henry.

"Yes, but I don't believe it will do us any good."

"Why?"

"Jippy Jerkum is stuck there, too."

"He is?"

"Yes, head and ears in love with her."

"Well, if she knew that rascal as I do," said Henry, "she'd as soon marry a Cherokee Indian as him."

"He seems to stand pretty high in this community?"

"So did Bill Conkel and every other big thief."

"You seem bitter, Henry?"

"No; only when I know a thief I think it my duty to point him out."

"Well, Jippy has lots of friends, but if he expects to win that girl he will find there is some one in his path. It will not be such easy sailing as he imagines."

"Why, Jerry, I did not dream you were so greatly in earnest?"

"I am."

"Well, I'll let you two sail in and whichever one comes out ahead shall be my rival."

"Ha, ha, ha! that's fair, Henry; you are always fair in your dealings."

That evening Jerry Blackman strolled down the village street toward the tavern of old Nathan Butts.

It seemed to him that old Nathan had no particular love for him, but he was bent on trying his powers to captivate the beautiful girl.

Jippy Jerkum, the lawyer, was there, twisting his sickly mustache and plucking the little whiskers at his chin.

The lawyer was upon the lawn, doubtless waiting for the appearance of the beauty.

She came at last and it was then that the lawyer learned that Jerry was to be his rival.

At first the attorney sneered at the idea, but as he began to notice the urbanity and elegance the the college youth, he plucked his whiskers with vexation.

Miss Martha gave the boy many of her sweetest smiles and the lawyer was really jealous.

"By Ned, the fellow is in my way," said Jippy Jerkum, as he walked home that evening, plucking his sickly whiskers and twirling his small mustache. "He is in my way and must be removed."

CHAPTER VI.

SLOW TORTURE.

Slowly as that unearthly light had faded away, it returned, and the room was filled with a strange white glare, produced only by the wonderful electric light.

The ten minutes had passed, time given to a man to choose—what? A mode by which his life might be spared? No; the mode of death he desired to die.

And what decision had the detective come to? Just the same that any other man would. He had come to no decision at all. How could he? How can any man choose a means of violent death?

The ten minutes had been passed in prayer for help and devising means of escape.

"God in heaven have mercy upon me and grant to give me aid," groaned the young detective, bitterly. It was terrible to die, and he so young, with so much of life before him.

But the doors opened and in stalked the eight gnome-like figures, with their horrid masks, all taking about the same positions as they had formerly occupied.

"Well, sir," said the goblin in lion's skin, who seemed to be the leader of the infernal band, "what do you say?"

"I have nothing to say," said the prisoner.

"Have you no choice?"

"I have."

"What is it?"

"Liberty."

"Liberty! Do you suppose we will let you go after having taken the trouble we have to capture you?"

"Why should you seek my life?"

"Why should you seek ours?"

"I have not."

"How dare you lie, Harry Grinell?"

The detective started. How did they know his name?

"Ah! you start! and well you may. Do you think that we do not know you?"

Harry hardly knew what course would be best to pursue. His identity seemed to have been discovered. There was really no help for him.

"Perhaps, sir, you do not know that we know your business here?"

"I do not know."

"Well, we do. You are one of Pinkerton's detectives."

"How do you know?"

"We know, that is sufficient."

"Who are you?"

"We are the ghouls of the earth, the ghosts who haunt the Red House, the mystery of Dead Man's Bluff."

"Heaven knows you have appropriate business."

"Never yet has a man who fell into the power of the ghouls of the Red House been known to escape."

It was useless for the detective to longer attempt to conceal his identity. He had just as well admit the truth and die like a man.

"Then my fate is sealed?"

"It is."

"Do your worst!"

"Do you defy us?"

"I do."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the demons, making the vault-like apartment ring, so fearful was their merriment.

"You are sure you dare defy us?" said the leader.

"I am; you are monsters capable for any atrocity, yet you may do your worst."

"You came here to find the Red House?" said the leader, interrogatively.

"I did."

"Aha! and you found it?"

"Yes."

"Well, did you expect us here?"

"Yes."

"But you did not expect such a reception as this?"

"I expected it if caught."

"Ha, ha, ha, my fine fellow. Wonderful pictures we have up there—wonderful, wonderful indeed."

The detective was silent.

"You are not in love with death, are you?"

"I would rather live."

"So I supposed. There is a chance."

"What?"

"Become one of our number."

"One of your number? What are you?"

"Never mind. You need not ask. Only become one of us or die."

"I will consent to nothing dishonorable."

"We are not robbers."

The detective was more surprised than ever. Yet he had never heard robbery imputed to the acts of the ghouls and gnomes who were said to inhabit the Red House.

If they were not robbers, what were they, and why did they conduct themselves in this mysterious manner?

"You were sent here to ferret out the murderers of old Sol Barksdale," said the chief of the gnome-like beings.

The detective was silent.

"It is not necessary that we should know that, for it is too palpable to deny. We know it, so we shall not ask you any more questions. We won't attempt to make you lie more. But, sir, you can live and retain your honor."

"How?"

"By giving us a bit of information."

"What is it?"

"Will you give it?"

"It depends altogether as to what it is."

"You have risked your life to come here to ferret out what is a mystery. These ignorant, simple people at the village would have let the mystery of old Sol Barksdale's death die long ago, had you not left your city home to come here and ferret it out. But you have failed. Now, we have a mystery, a secret we desire. Upon your giving us that information you shall be set at liberty."

"Immediately?"

"Yes, or as soon as we are convinced that the information given is true."

"What is it?"

"Where is Jay Gormley?"

The detective started. Well he might, for had a bomb exploded at his feet he could not have been more astounded.

Jay Gormley was a wonder. In fact, as much of a mystery to the evil-doers as was this mystery of Dead Man's Bluff to the detectives.

None of them had ever seen him. He never made an arrest, though he was a detective. The other detectives seldom saw him.

Only a few were intrusted with the secret of his habitation, which was a hut in the forest among the boulders and rocks.

He always furnished the information for the capture of culprits, either in the country or town. When the information was all furnished he was known no more.

There was some motive, some deep motive, that the ghouls had for knowing the whereabouts of Jay Gormley.

"Do you know where he is?"

The detective was silent.

"You do!" said the chief of the monsters, drawing the lion skin closer about him and raising one paw-like hand. "You do and you shall tell."

The detective was still silent. He knew that if they got the information from him they desired he would be speedily put to death.

"Why don't ye speak?" roared the chief, with a horrible oath.

"I can speak, sir," cried the detective, with some spirit.

"Do so, then. Will you give us the information?"

"No!"

"You shall," roared the lion king, as he was called, with another oath.

"Release my hands, sir—they pain me," cried the detective.

"Give us the information and you shall be released."

"Why do you wish to know of Jay Gormley?"

"That is our business. Tell us at once."

"No, never!"

"Then you shall die!"

"Die it is—I am ready," answered Harry, boldly. "Can you say as much?"

"We want none of your Methodist prayer-meetings here. You shall die a death that will make your bones shudder a thousand years hence, should it be mentioned where they bleach.

"Let your death be quick and horrible; I can endure it," said the brave young detective.

"No, no; you need not expect so easily to escape. You shall die a slow, lingering death."

"How?" Harry asked. It was but natural that he should.

"By torture!"

So fiendish and determined were the words spoken that he shuddered. Well he might.

The awful mystery surrounding him and the place and people into whose hands he had fallen was enough to make the very flesh creep upon his bones.

They were not robbers, they said, and he had never heard any robbery attributed to them. Then who and what were they?

They must be some terrible secret organization into whose power he had fallen and whose laws he had violated.

He could but expect the punishment, be it what it might, that they would mete out to him.

"You shall die one of the most horrible deaths, a death which shall make you pray for death long before it comes," said the

lion king, arising from his couch and summoning his men by a clap of his hands.

They sprang to their feet, seized the helpless prisoner, and, taking him into the passage, bound him upon his back. A tin bucket was brought filled with water. A small hole was punched in the bottom and the bucket suspended about five feet above the head of the helpless man.

Spat, spat, spat came the drops of water, the last falling on the detective's forehead.

The bucket was so suspended from the ceiling that each drop fell in the centre of Harry's forehead.

The first few that fell did not seem to hurt him, but anon each drop became as terrible as a blow from a sledge hammer.

Spat, spat, spat they came.

"Great God, have mercy on me!" he groaned, as the torture momentarily increased.

The fiends only laughed at his writhings and at last consciousness began to fade away.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE WOODS.

Jerry Blackman seemed to improve his opportunity with the belle who had so lately come to Millbrook. Jippy Jerkum was growing more and more restless as he observed the continued preference for the little upstart.

Martha was evidently older by one or two years than Jerry, but what boy in love ever allowed a disparity of one or two years in ages to make any difference?

"I'll come it over that humbug of a lawyer yet and make him pluck his whiskers out by the roots," said Jerry to his friend, Henry Larkmore.

"Don't put yourself in his power," said Henry. "Jippy Jerkum is terrible."

"I'll draw his teeth and clip his claws for him."

"Well, you may come to grief from Jippy."

"Jippy! ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jerry, contemptuously. "A name well applied. He is a puppy."

"He calls you a puppy."

"Little do I care for his opinion," said Jerry, boldly.

"But you don't know him?"

"I know enough of him to know that he is a rascal and coward."

"There are some dark hints concerning this lawyer. He is said to be in league with the powers of darkness and capable of the most wonderful mischief."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. But somehow all the enemies of Jippy Jerkum come to grief in some way, I can't explain it."

"Well, who came to grief?"

"Why, there was Eugene Rayburn, who insulted him by calling him a puppy and slapping his face in public. One day Rayburn disappeared. He never was heard of, but a few months later a grinning skeleton was found in the enchanted woods. There was a bullet hole in the centre of his skull."

"Well, how did they know it was Rayburn?" asked Jerry.

"By one finger joint being off and a broken front tooth," said Henry Larkmore.

"Was nothing done about it?"

"Nothing could be done. An inquest was held and that was all that they could do," said Henry. "They knew it was Rayburn, and yet the means of his death was not known. There was considerable surmising, and many dark hints, but Jippy Jerkum was triumphant to the last."

"Well, I don't care a continental for Jippy Jerkum. I am as quick of eye and as true of nerve as he. Let him try any of his games on me if he dares."

"Yes, but he will resort to some devilish necromancing plan."

"Ha! ha! ha! necromancing, indeed," said Jerry.

"Do you laugh at the idea?"

"Yes."

"I thought, after your experience at the Red House, you would never hoot at the idea of some supernatural power there."

"I was frightened there, Henry, I will admit," said Jerry, "but then I never for a single moment attributed the sights and sounds I there beheld to any other than natural causes."

"Well, natural causes might cause one to tremble at certain times."

"Oh, well, Henry, I'm enjoying this little rivalry with Jippy and will take the consequences."

He put on his hat and went out upon the street. As if drawn

by some strange magnetic influence, he wended his way toward the tavern where Miss Martha Daily was staying.

Lem Daily, the father of the beauty, seemed engaged in some business, which took him from home a good portion of the time. He was there frequently, remaining but a day or two, when he would disappear as suddenly as he came.

"I wonder if Martha is at home?" said Jerry, recklessly, as he tilted back his hat, tried to look as tall as possible, and wished that he had a mustache on his face.

As soon as a boy falls in love he begins to bestow care upon his mustache.

Jerry had never thought of this necessary appendage to manhood until he began to bask in the smiles of Miss Daily. Then it was watching and praying.

He shaved frequently and stood for hours before the glass brushing the soft little down upon his upper lip. Now, boys, don't laugh at Jerry—he is no sillier than many of you have been.

Miss Daily was alone in her room and at his tap at the door she opened it.

"Welcome—welcome!" she said, with a radiant smile, which just displayed the tips of her pearly teeth.

"Oh, Martha, alone? This is bliss," said the boy.

"Bliss? Indeed, you must be growing quite sentimental."

"I am, Martha, in your presence," said the boy.

"You are too young to become sentimental, Jerry."

The words went like a knife to his heart. She had never before hinted at his youth and he felt that it was degrading to him.

"Cannot the young be sentimental, Miss Martha? Is bliss to be denied me because I am not old, gray and wrinkled?"

He had regained his self-possession almost instantly.

"Why, I should think not," and the smile was so sweet, so radiant and full of tender emotion that Jerry felt fully repaid for all he had suffered the moment before. "We must be good friends anyway, Jerry, for you know I have no other friend here."

"You can count on me always."

"Always?" she said, with an arch smile and a deep meaning in her question.

"Always!" said the boy. "Through thick and thin; through adversity as well as prosperity."

"Oh, no, Jerry," she said, with a sad smile upon her sweet face. "Friends may prove true to us in prosperity, but there are dark hours which come when we are deserted by all."

"But Martha, do you not believe that I will prove true on such an occasion?"

"You might."

"Oh, Martha!"

There was a momentary silence, then the boy whispered:

"I love you!"

"Hush, boy!" the girl cried, in alarm, turning somewhat pale.

"I do; I swear it."

"You know not what you say."

"I do. I can speak my mind——"

"Oh, you cannot, you must not!" she cried, gently pushing the boy from her. "You are too young."

He did not understand the fatal import of those words. Interpreting them to cast some slur upon his youth, he cried:

"Ah, Martha, is it a crime to be young? Is it a sin for which I should atone with all the misery and scorn you are enabled to heap upon me? Answer me, Martha. Am I hateful to your sight simply because I am a boy?"

"No, no, Jerry, you do not understand me. You misinterpret my words, and I—I cannot, must not explain."

His visit was anything but satisfactory. Although he was permitted to take the beautiful young woman in his arms and kiss her, it was more like kissing an elder sister than a sweetheart.

He went back to the house of Henry, striving to cheer up and be gay.

"Come, Henry, let's take our guns and to the woods. What say you?"

"Agreed, my fine fellow."

In a few moments the boys had their rifles on their shoulders and were on their way for a grand hunt.

It was just after an early dinner and the boys had all the afternoon for hunting.

Up the great hill they wended their way, each with a gun on his shoulder.

The large forest near Millbrook, being near the great western frontier, had some large game in it—game which might command the respect of any rifleman.

"Well, Jerry, I suppose you and your girl are getting along nicely, are you not?" asked Henry.

"Yes," was the abrupt answer.

"Well, now can't you praise her charms some to-day? You are nearly always ready with a good word for her."

"I don't think of anything more to add," said Jerry, with a smile.

"Nothing more to add? What, paid a visit to your sweetheart and returned without discovering some new charm?"

Jerry blushed as only a boy can and then said:

"New charms are ever to be discovered in one so lovely as she, but I care not to discuss them. It is a subject too sacred."

"Did you see Jippy?"

"No."

"Well, he saw you, I'd swear."

"Why?"

"He was looking at you as you entered the tavern and then he took up a position beneath Miss Martha's window, where he remained until you came out."

"Why did he do that?"

"I don't know."

"He is an eavesdropper and I shall tell him so."

"Do not enrage him more, Jerry, for he was white with rage and I saw him eyeing you from his office window as we started away."

"Hark! what was that?"

It was the sound of footsteps, as if some animal was leaping away.

"A deer, a deer," whispered Jerry, grasping his rifle in his hands and creeping forward through the thicket.

Henry followed him at a respectful distance to let his friend get the first shot at the game.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CURIOUS FIGHT.

Creeping stealthily forward, with his rifle cocked and parting the thick bushes with his hands, Jerry at last came to a small bottom covered with rich green grass and surrounded with thick hazels.

In the bottom lands, not a hundred yards away, was a deer, feeding upon the soft, tender grass which grew beneath the older verdure.

"Now is my chance to kill my first deer," said Jerry.

All thought of his love for Miss Daily and all dread and hatred of Jippy Jerkum was gone in the all-absorbing desire for sport.

Raising the rifle to his face, he took a deliberate aim and pulled the trigger.

The sharp report rang out and the animal bounded high into the air.

Jerry had aimed just behind the fore shoulder of the deer, having always been told that it was the most vital part.

Down came the deer upon its feet again, seeming for a moment stunned and confused, and then recovering itself it made one prodigious leap, sailing over a bunch of bushes out of sight.

"I've hit him! I've hit him!" cried Jerry. Without waiting for his friend to come up, and without pausing to reload, a precaution an experienced hunter will always take, he dashed into the bush after the wounded deer.

He paused at the first clump of bushes where it alighted, after its great leap, and, seeing blood upon the ground and leaves, uttered a shout of exultation and started as fast as he could go.

Henry answered his shout, or at least thought he did.

"Hey, Mr. Long-hams, I'll have you yet," cried Jerry, running through the forest.

The ground was very uneven, being broken into ravines, hills and hollows. Great trees and smaller underbrush grew in places so thick that one could scarcely get along.

Yet Jerry tore through these, perfectly regardless of consequences.

His face was scratched and his skin torn until the blood trickled down it and yet he did not seem to realize that he was suffering any injury.

The broken bushes, the soil, deeply cut with the flying hoofs, the increase of blood which streamed along the path, seemed a greater incentive to renewed speed.

He did not note the flight of time, nor felt fatigue or heat.

The day was hot, but he only saw himself as a conqueror, the slayer of a deer, and strained every muscle to keep up with the wounded, dying animal.

Of course the deer was far, far ahead of him, struggling, flying, thundering with blind fury, and nerves fast growing weaker from loss of blood, but the boy could follow his trail.

He came to one place where there was quite a puddle of blood, as if the deer had stopped to rest, and the red life current had flown from him as he stood.

"It is certainly growing weaker and weaker every moment," said Jerry. "I will come on it soon."

He raised his voice and shouted for Henry.

Only the hollow echoes came back to him.

"Is it possible that he has got so far behind that he is lost?" the boy asked himself. "Well, I can't wait for him. I must have that deer, be the cost what it may."

He ran on.

The sun went down.

It was the first intimation he had of the approach of night.

"Oh, if I could only find it before night comes," said the boy. "I will lose it if night should come. And to lose it now, after all I have done, would be too bad."

He discovered through the tree tops lighted by the last expiring rays of the setting sun, a small, meadow-like land or morass, covered partly with grass and partly with water.

He hurried forward, hoping to see the object of his hunt near it.

Sure enough there it stood.

He brought his rifle to his shoulder, determined to give it a final shot.

Taking a careful aim at the body he pulled the trigger.

Click went the gun.

"Confound it!" said the vexed boy, somewhat nervously; "I forgot to load my rifle."

He poured out a charge of powder, put it in his gun and then rammed home a ball.

He trembled so with excitement and haste that his nerves were all unsettled.

But finally he managed to put on a cap and once more raised his weapon.

He still trembled and it was growing so late that the light was rather uncertain.

He took down his gun and advanced a few paces on the right, where, behind a small tree, he could get a better aim.

The forests around the great morass were growing darker and darker as the sun sank to rest in the west.

Taking a rest from the tree, the boy once more drew a bead on the deer.

A flash of fire issued from a thicket only a few rods on his right and the report of a gun rang out on the air.

He was thunderstruck, more than thunderstruck, for he was enraged when he saw his deer sink down beneath the strange marksman's fire.

"That's Henry's trick," said Jerry to himself, angrily, "and I don't think any better of him for it."

To his astonishment a strange, tall, gaunt woman, dressed in rude homespun, with a rifle in her hands, emerged from the thicket and advanced toward the deer.

"I guess ole Kill-nigger brought 'im," she said, with a chuckle, as she drew from her girdle a knife.

"Hold there, madam, that's my deer!" cried Jerry.

The woman paused a moment at the side of the fallen animal and turned her great gray eyes upon the boy.

About her head was a woolen shawl, showing in front the tangled and matted hair.

"Who be ye?" she cried, holding her rifle in one hand and a knife in the other as she gazed on Jerry, who was approaching her.

"That's my deer."

"It ain't."

"I shot it first, and, drawing first blood, it's mine. I am willing to divide with you, but it's my deer."

"Guess ye are willin' to divide, but it's mine, young brat!"

The woman was strangely hoarse and masculine. There was a look of fury and exultation on her hideous face as she gazed triumphantly on the boy.

"I tell you, madam, it's my deer."

"We'll see."

"Look and see if my bullet did not strike it first."

"How d'ye know yer bullet from anybody else's bullet, I'd like ter know."

"There are two bullets in the deer. The first I fired and the last you."

"Likely tale, that."

"Well, I'll have my share," said our hero, defiantly, as he advanced toward her.

"I'd like to know how?"

"By fair means or foul."

"He! he! he! yes, indeed!"

"We'll see."

"Yes, we will."

"Madam, you are a woman. I don't want any trouble

with a woman, but I am just determined to have that which is justly mine."

"Well, take it."

The boy set his rifle down against a small bush and the woman did the same with her gun.

As our young hunter advanced to take up the deer the woman, with a savage growl, seized him.

"Let go!" cried Jerry.

"I won't."

"I'll make you."

"I'll slap ye if ye do."

He tripped her and she in turn gave the boy a rousing slap with her great, broad hand.

"Good golly!" cried the enraged boy.

The air seemed radiant with stars.

He clenched her and a curious fight begun. Up and down, round and round they struggled, while the deer, which had only been stunned by the last shot, raised its head curiously and gazed about on the scene.

CHAPTER IX.

A STRANGE GOBLIN.

Up and down, round and round, Jerry Blackman and the strange woman struggled. He was tripping her at each moment, and she belaboring him with blows that made him see stars.

Suddenly she broke away. Jerry tripped her, struck her with his fist and she fell against the deer.

The animal now having somewhat recovered, sprang to its feet.

The Amazonian realized that the prize for which she was contending was about to escape and clasped her arms about its neck.

Away went the deer, tearing and crashing through the bushes and woods, kicking at every jump, but the determined huntress hung on.

Jerry laughed in spite of himself. The sight was so comical that any one would have been compelled to laugh, even if it was his last moment on earth.

The deer was kicking and struggling with might and main to get away and the woman was holding on to it with a determination equally as great as the deer's.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jerry, "I will lose my deer, that is certain, but then the fun of seeing that old hag dragged away in such style amply repays me."

He heard them crashing and thrashing through the brush.

"I guess she will see as many stars as she made me see with her infernal boxes. But it will not do for me to remain here longer. Night is coming on and unless I expect to pass the night in the forest, I had better be moving away."

He took up his rifle and started through the wood.

"Where on earth is Henry? Can't be that I have lost him. Hello—oo—oo."

No answer.

"He has become lost, or, unable to keep in sight of me, has turned back. Henry! H—e—n—r—y!" he yelled, prolonging each separate sound in the word.

Only the echo "H—e—n—r—y" came in response.

"By Ned, if the echoes of this wood will pardon me for using one of that contemptible puppy's phrases, I believe I stand a good show for passing the night in the woods."

It had now grown so dark that he could not follow his path. The moon had not risen yet and he concluded it best to wait until it did.

"I will just sit down on this log and wait," said the youth to himself.

He threw himself on the log with his back against a tree and half closed his eyes.

Poor Jerry, he was very near exhausted. His run had been a long one and he felt that he needed rest. He leaned back against the tree, which grew at the side of the log, and closed his eyes.

"If I have to pass the night in the woods, why not pass it here?" the boy said.

It is not pleasant for a boy to spend a night in the dark woods, yet he was so tired that he almost felt contented to do so.

True, he was supperless and hungry. If he had only a sandwich he felt that he would be content to stay alone in the woods.

"Where is Henry?" he asked himself. "He has certainly forgotten me altogether."

At last the moon began to peep over the eastern hills, throwing out its bright rays into the forest.

"Well, that's some comfort," said the young hunter. "I will have some light and maybe I can find my way back home."

He waited until the moon was well up in the sky. Then, finding the path, he started toward Millbrook as fast as he could go.

His limbs were stiff and sore from the long chase, but by exercise he got warmed up and moved more rapidly.

Suddenly he paused and gazed at an object standing beneath a large tree upon a small hillock.

It was an old man with long white hair and beard, leaning upon a staff.

The boy started back and took his rifle from his shoulder, but the old man seeing his movement, said:

"My son, where do you wander?"

The voice denoted feebleness and age and the personification of kindness, yet beneath that smooth exterior there was something to dread. What that something was the boy could not say, but it was there.

In a voice as free from astonishment as he could at the moment command, Jerry Blackman answered:

"I am on my way to the village."

"What village, son?"

"Millbrook."

"To Millbrook?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are on the wrong road."

"Is that so?"

"It certainly is."

"And how far am I from Millbrook?"

"You are fully ten miles, my boy, and will soon be traveling through the enchanted forest."

Jerry had heard of the enchanted forest. The ignorant villagers supposed this forest to be inhabited by goblins and demons, who enticed the traveler to their lonely wilds, and there either turned him to some inferior animal, or to stone, as the humor suited them.

Nowhere in the world is the belief in witches, goblins and evil spirits stronger than among the ignorant pioneers. The author has known houses and even large plantations or scopes of wood to be deserted for years, no one daring to go near them. So strong is their superstitious terror that they would as soon think of jumping into a burning crater as to enter this enchanted wood.

Of course Jerry Blackman, the enlightened student, did not believe any of these stories. He had smiled at them when he heard them.

"You would not go near the enchanted wood, would you?"

"I have no fears of it, I can assure you," he answered. "Yet I would much rather go home to-night."

"Do you mean to say, boy, that the enchanted forest has no terrors for you?"

The old man took a step nearer and the moonbeams falling upon his bare head and long white beard, gave him the appearance of a goblin.

"I do not believe that the forest is enchanted."

"You do not?"

"No, sir."

"Beware, my boy, for many a young man who uttered the same words has paid the forfeit with his life."

"How?"

"The goblins which inhabit the forest turned them to stones. You can see them lying about you everywhere when you enter the forest. Should you, in passing through it, look either to the right or left, or behind you, you would add one more to the round stones which lie at the roadside."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the boy. "I have certainly got back into the land of the Arabian Nights. I would like to see this enchanted forest."

"Would you be equal to the ordeal?"

"Yes."

"Young man, beware, if you falter or turn aside, your ruin will instantly follow."

"I am willing to take all the risks."

"Then follow me. Your road home leads through a part of the enchanted forest."

"Lead on; I will follow you."

The old man started along, leaning heavily on his staff. The boy, with his rifle in his hand, followed him.

The old man seemed troubled with constant fits of coughing and made the woods resound with his whoops.

There came on the night air the hoot of an owl, which was answered by the shrill cry of a catbird.

The coughing of the old guide seemed always to arouse the night birds, whose shrill screams were terrible to hear.

The boy followed and did not more than notice these strange cries were drawing nearer and nearer to him.

"Now, young man," said the gray-haired guide, "we are about to enter the enchanted woods. Another rod and we will have crossed the line. Beware! Do not look to right, left or behind you. It makes no difference what noise you hear, even though some one should shout to you. If you would live, go on; if you falter you will perish."

He started along the path indicated by the old man and had gone but a dozen rods when there came a sharp cry in his rear, a cry so wild and shrill as to almost unnerve him. He wheeled about, his rifle cocked. He started and cried:

"My God!" Before him was a monster goblin, fully seven feet high, with a form part man, part serpent and part animal, with great bat-like wings at his shoulders. His eyes were blazing coals of fire, and, uttering a hiss, a blue brimstone blaze seemed to issue from the goblin's mouth.

Plucky to the last, the boy half raised his rifle, when he received a crushing blow on the head and became unconscious.

CHAPTER X.

AN ANGEL OF MERCY.

How long Harry Grinell, the detective, was unconscious under the torture of the dropping water he had no means of knowing.

When he recovered he felt as if some one had been pounding his head with a hammer, but those beating leaden drops had ceased to fall.

What could it mean?

The strange white light had gone out, and yet there was enough to discern that the tunnel in which he lay was deserted by those horrid monsters who had been torturing him.

He did not see their blazing eyes, but far down in the tunnel could be seen a feeble lamp.

Above him hung the tin bucket, but the water had run out. He understood now why the torture had ceased.

The fiends believed him dead and had left him.

His arms and legs were still so firmly bound as to be stiff and painful.

He at first could not remember what had happened, but slowly by degrees the dreadful recollection returned to him.

"Oh, God, this is horrible," he groaned. "Am I in the hands of human beings or in the regions of the infernal?"

Well might he ask that question, for of all the means of torture of which he had ever read, this was the most terrible. The Spanish Inquisition, with all its infernal machinery, could be nothing compared to this.

The wild, weird aspect and grotesque masks seemed to add to the natural horror. Then those lights so strangely appearing and disappearing without any apparent human agency, were enough to inspire any one with a vague superstitious terror.

Harry groaned.

"Is there no one here to help me. Oh, God, am I thus totally deserted?"

There came a light footfall along the corridor. It came stealthily forward.

In the weird, uncertain darkness he descried a slight form stealing forward through the strange corridor.

It wore no grotesque or horrible mask, but instead a heavy veil, which almost concealed the face.

The form was the form of a woman, and from the movements and light, airy, graceful manner, he would judge it to be the form of a girl.

"Whist!"

He listened.

Faintly upon the air came the warning. It was too low to be heard with any certainty, and for a moment the poor prisoner confined there upon his back thought he must be mistaken. But no, he was not. Again, still louder came the warning:

"Whist!"

"Heaven help me!" ejaculated the captive. "Can any one be coming to finish the work so horribly begun?"

Slowly on tip-toe the fairy-like creature glided forward. It was a woman, and yet her advance was like that of the murderer in a tragedy.

For a moment, but only for a moment, Harry was enchanted, as it were, by the graceful movements. It seemed only a piece of excellent acting, and he an interested spectator.

Now, as through the uncertain light the strange being drew nearer and nearer, he caught the glimpse of a bright blade flashing in her right hand.

"Come on," he murmured feebly. "I will hail you as an angel of mercy if you will but free me from this awful imprisonment by taking my life. Plunge your dagger into my heart, and plunge it deep; let there be no time for ceremony."

"Whist!"

Again came that faintly-uttered warning.

"What do you mean?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Do you want to live?"

"Yes."

"Then keep quiet."

"Who are you?"

"Never mind."

"Can you befriend me?"

"Yes."

"Then for God's sake remove these infernal bonds from my hands and feet."

"Keep quiet for a moment, until I see if the coast is clear."

The voice was that of a woman, and though she spoke in a whisper, there was an infinite sweetness about her tones.

"Are you going away?" he asked, the most intense agony expressed in his manner.

"Yes, for a moment."

"Oh, for God's sake relieve me before you do so."

"No, no; keep perfectly quiet if you would have your life spared."

"Heavens! I cannot. I suffer as if I were placed on living coals of fire; relief or death will soon come to me."

"You must submit to it a moment, or it will be death," she whispered as he glided past the prostrate form.

She was gone, and he lay groaning and lamenting his fate.

"She only came to mock my misery, to see if I was dead. Oh, devils that you are, if I but had you in my hands, you should more than pay for every groan you have wrung from me. Each groan should be rewarded with an ounce of blood."

His voice was faint.

He felt himself rapidly sinking and hoped, nay, knew, that this was into the eternal sleep of death.

He was murmuring a prayer which was to be his last on earth, when the same sweet voice, like some deceitful hope, sounded in his ear.

"Whist!"

"Go away; let me die in peace!"

"Nay, the coast is clear for the present."

Then his faint, chill senses seemed to realize that some one was bending over him.

Whether his bonds were cut or untied he did not know, but he was released.

His head was raised from the stone floor upon which it rested, and he was supported by arms soft and tender, and his head pillowed upon a breast which seemed possessed of gentleness.

A tender hand was pressed to his aching brow, and cordial was poured down his throat.

Consciousness and strength were rapidly returning, and in a few moments he realized that he was growing better.

He was still too weak to rise or stand upon his feet. His ankles and wrists were greatly swollen and sore, while his brain whirled wildly.

"Can you not walk?" his deliverer asked, in her sweet, gentle voice.

"No."

"We must get away from here soon."

"I don't believe my swollen limbs will bear the weight of my body."

"If they return and find you released it might——"

The fair speaker hesitated.

"Might what?" asked Harry.

"It would prove the death of both of us."

"But I cannot go."

"Take another drink from this flask; it may lend you momentary strength."

She handed him the flask and he drank deep of it.

He felt the blood stirring from its fountain-seat and warming his stiffened and benumbed limbs.

"I will try to crawl," he said. "Go on, and on my elbows and knees I may be enabled to follow you. I cannot walk with my feet for some time yet."

"Come this way," she said, leading the way along a narrow passage past the door.

On his knees and elbows he followed her.

They were necessarily compelled to move slowly, for the corridor was dark, and the floor, being rough stone, every foot gone over was with the most excruciating pain to our hero.

His elbows and knees were bruised until they became black, and then the skin wore away, and the blood oozed through,

causing keen smarting pains as they came in contact with anything.

He was occasionally compelled to pause and rest.

At last the strange rescuer opened a door which seemed to pass into the walls, but which the struggling, suffering man found entered a smaller, narrower and almost unused passage.

When they were once inside of it she closed the door, and put up some heavy cross-bars and bolts, as if to prevent any intrusion.

The door was evidently of thick iron, and though the darkness was so intense that one could scarcely see anything, our hero was convinced that this was a secret passage.

The woman stooped over the man, who had fallen prostrate upon the floor, and in a voice whose rippling music sounded like the gush of water over some tiny cascade, said:

"Try now, sir; try to rise. I will aid you all I can. You can lean on me, and we will soon be in a place of temporary safety."

After several efforts he got upon his feet, and was enabled by the assistance of his strange deliverers to walk along the corridor.

They came at last to an apartment which was lighted by two tallow candles. It was prepared with an eye to luxury and comfort.

Upon the walls hung many paintings, the most of which were portraits in large heavy frames.

There was a couch in the apartment, on which the young detective sank completely exhausted.

CHAPTER XI.

TURNUED TO STONE.

When one has suddenly fallen into a state of unconsciousness, especially if that unconsciousness be produced by violence, and awakens in some strange unknown place, the naturally bewildered faculties are slow at comprehending the situation.

It was so with Jerry Blackman. Traveling through the enchanted forest, he had suddenly been struck senseless.

Having been warned that if he cast a glance behind him or upon either side that he would be turned to stone, and having met a form of most horrid kind, and then instantly become unconscious, a mind less superstitious might well have believed that the warning was true.

When the feeble senses of the youth permitted his eyes to open and glance about him he found himself in some strange subterranean apartment. His mind was working feebly, and all past seemed to him a blank, a horrible blank.

He saw a dim light, which might have come from some lamp suspended from the ceiling, as it might have been the phosphorescent light from a tomb. He did not know or care to know.

He seemed to have no ambition to stir. He did not know whether he was comfortable or not, and did not care.

There was no ambitious desire to get up and survey the subterranean apartment to see of what it was composed and who inhabited it.

He did not know to a certainty whether it was himself who lay there or whether it was something else. It might be a log or a stone.

He had no recollection of having lived in the past, or if he did, it was such a feeble recollection as to create a most singular doubt in his mind, if he had a mind.

He might possess a mind and he might not.

He tried to move, and found that he could not with his own volition.

This seemed to confirm the stone or log theory. But if he was a log and not a human being, why was he there?

He tried to think; then thought how ridiculous it was for a stone or a log to think.

He tried to remember, but stones and logs could not remember.

Where was he?

If he was really a stone, a log or some inanimate object, then why should he care where he was? It was certainly not reasonable that a log would be so deep under the ground, for he knew he must be under the ground.

Then he was not a log, but a stone.

The stone theory was in the ascendancy in his mind, if he had a mind. He did not seem to care particularly. There was a strange, careless, inanimate feeling about him, such as a stone might be supposed to possess.

"Where am I?"

This is the question always asked by people when they recover from a fit of fainting, especially if the faint be a sham faint or played upon the stage.

It is very natural for people to want to know where they are and though some don't always seem choice of their locality, still they want to be able to take their bearings.

But then is it not natural for a stone to want to know where it is, or to care?

Well, as none of us were ever stones we can't tell. Stones may have a special choice of places, but the mason never regards their feelings.

Jerry Blackman, or what was once Jerry Blackman, be he stone, man or log, seemed to have but very little choice. If he possessed any mind at all it was a very feeble mind.

One thing was certain to him, he saw a lamp. He knew it was a lamp, though exactly how to know it he did not know. He did not know that he had ever seen or heard of a lamp before, but this was a lamp, and it gave forth a light.

It was an oil lamp, the nozzle end shaped somewhat like the bow of a schooner and was what is by some people called a "jay bird lamp." Yes, he knew that much.

Then he knew more, that he was in an underground apartment walled within a stone, and that he seemed stuck into, or was a part of the wall.

This confirmed the stone theory. He was a stone and not a log.

Then if a stone he must be a part of the wall. His head, if he had a head, was resting on something very much like a dry mortar bed, and he could only look about a small portion of the apartment.

He observed that his companions, the other stones, were large.

He was only about five feet up in the wall, then what a tremendous weight must be on him!

He would very much have liked to turn over, but could not. He either did not possess the power or else the great weight upon him held him fast.

Well, he was there in this wall, a stone and part of it. He was doomed to stay there perhaps for ceaseless ages.

It was bad enough to be a stone and lie out in the sunshine where he could hear the birds sing and brooks bubble, and sometimes feel the refreshing dews and gentle rains, but to lie here forever in this hidden underground vault, it was horrible.

"I wish I could think, but then a stone can't think," he thought. He did not try to speak, for he supposed his tongue was powerless.

He observed some horrible grinning skeletons hanging upon the wall, and shuddered and grew afraid; if a stone can shudder and grow afraid.

One was near him, and the long, white bones hung silent and awful down the stone wall.

The door of the apartment opened and some one entered.

He was lying so he could see that heavy iron door as it swung open. It was massive, and Jerry Blackman, as we shall still call him, be he transformed into stone or not, would suppose that door to weigh tons.

But the being who entered was the greatest puzzle to this stone, if a stone can be puzzled.

He was tall and slender, with sharp features; nose and chin prominent, sharp and almost touching.

There was a peculiar, horrible-looking crown upon his head and large but life-like wings upon his shoulders.

A tail swung from the body to the ground, on the end of which was a spear. One foot was cloven and the other natural.

"Satan!" thought the stone.

"You are right!" said this strange, grotesque figure in a voice so hollow and deep, so awful as to make all the companion stones groan and cry out. "You are right," continued his satanic majesty. "And do you know who you are? Speak out, for I will give a few moments' power of speech."

"No, I do not."

"Think."

"I cannot think," answered the stone.

"Momentary powers of thought will be given you," and the monster raised his trident and swept it over the surface of the wall. "Now, do you not remember that you were once a human being?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, God, yes."

"You transgressed our laws, you entered the enchanted forest."

"Yes."

"And now see how you have suffered."

"This is some infernal spell which is very simple, if I could only understand and break it," cried the unsuperstitious stone.

"Very simply—yes; but a moment more. Do you remember Jippy Jerkum?"

"Yes."

"And Martha Daily whom you loved?"

"I do."

"While you are here a stone, turned to such by your own stubbornness, he will be making love to her and win."

"Demon, you lie!"

"Ha! ha! We shall see."

Then it was that Jerry Blackman struggled with might and main to free himself. He remembered it all, and knew it was only some infernal trick played upon him by demons in human form.

"These," said the strange goblin, pointing to the large stones which composed the wall, "were like you once—men—young, reckless, careless men, who, against all warning, entered the enchanted forest and suffered as you have. Some have been here for years, and some but a few weeks. They have paid the penalty of their rashness, and so will you."

Then by a superhuman effort Jerry glanced down at what should be the lower part of his body, and saw only a large peculiar, oblong stone.

Was it all real, and was he transformed into stone?

Jerry felt a sense of horror at his situation, indescribable, and one he had never experienced or known before.

The demon, whose eyes were now glaring like coals of fire, said:

"Your time for talking is past. Henceforth, forever, you are but a silent, senseless stone, and a part of this wall."

He moved a dark flag near the wall and Jerry, or the stone, whichever you choose to call him, felt a peculiar sinking sensation, and all became a blank.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EFFORT TO ESCAPE.

Harry Grinell, the detective, awoke from what seemed to be a refreshing sleep. He found that his ankles and wrists, so stiff and sore from the cruel bonds which had bound them, had been bathed with healing liniments, and the soreness and swelling were almost gone. He was greatly refreshed, and arose to a sitting position on the couch and gazed about in the room.

Where was he, and in what kind of a place? he asked himself.

There was no one in the apartment at this moment. He gazed about upon the pictures, almost the same which had ornamented the Red House on Dead Man's Bluff.

As he looked upon them he wondered if they could speak, as others had done. Could those eyes painted in the canvas gleam with intelligence, and from those busts might not arms start forth, living and natural, and hold upon him a deadly revolver?

"There is a mystery about Dead Man's Bluff which is too deep for me to fathom," said the detective to himself, as he rubbed his eyes and gazed about the apartment.

He started up and began to walk about.

"How long have I been unconscious?" he asked himself. "Was it only a few hours or days?"

His knees and elbows were still bruised and sore, which convinced him that it had only been for a few hours.

There was no superstition about our hero. He did not attribute what he saw to the actions of demons or goblins, but to the carefully arranged machinery of infamous villains, who desired to give an air of the supernatural to their acts in order that their unlawful deeds might not be discovered.

He examined the paintings on the walls. They were hung in frames from cords, and not set in the wall, as the pictures in the Red House above.

There was no room nor chance for any treachery in these paintings. They were without doubt real oil paintings or portraits and landscapes, and not merely clever tricks and devices gotten up to ensnare some one.

The walls were evidently solid stone masonry. He searched them closely, and was surprised to discover that they had been built many years.

Could it be that all these mysteries and all this horror had existed for months, perhaps years, so near to Millbrook and never been discovered?

It was almost beyond human belief. Then again, were all these subterranean passages and apartments natural or artificial? If artificial, how could they have been constructed without some of the villagers having discovered it?

While he was yet making his investigations the door opened, and the same strange being who had released him before entered.

"I am glad to see you so much better," she said in a voice which was the sweetest music that had ever ravished the human ear.

"I am better, in fact almost myself again, thanks to your kindness and generosity," he answered. "I owe to you one of the deepest debts of gratitude."

"You owe me nothing, sir," said the woman, seating herself upon a cushioned chair, without attempting to remove the veil which covered her face. "I have but done my duty to a human being."

"But so few do their duty in this cold, selfish world, that when we find one we almost feel inclined to worship them."

"Speak not of that, Mr. Grinell," she said. He started at hearing this mysterious woman pronounce his name so easily and familiarly. "We have no time to talk of sentiment now. Are you satisfied with your apartment?"

He looked at her in surprise.

"Why did you ask this?"

"Because I desire to know if you are comfortable."

"I am at least as comfortable as any one might be under like circumstances. What I desire is to know if I am to have my freedom."

"Such is my intention."

"At once?"

"No, that cannot be."

"What have you to exact from me?" asked the detective. "If it is the whereabouts of that mysterious personage, Jay Gormley, the man who is calculated to uproot all this villainy, I tell you now, you might as well have killed me at first. I will reveal nothing."

"I have nothing to exact," the mysterious woman said.

"Then why not release me at once?"

"Because it cannot be thought of."

"Can you not give me some reason?"

"Let it suffice that the means of your escape are not prepared yet."

"Give me my good revolver and I will find the means."

The girl laughed.

"Little good your revolver would do against these solid walls of masonry."

"Are there not doors here through which I can escape?"

"Can you not trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then why question me? You cannot escape now. You must not think of it," said the woman.

"But why can you not give me the reasons for my not escaping now?"

"There are reasons which I think best not to impart at present."

For a few moments he sat silent and still, his eyes fixed upon the strange being before him. There were a thousand conflicting thoughts whirling through his mind. Could it be only a new device to add to his torture?

Was his life only preserved that he might suffer greater tortures than he ever dreamed of before?

He had said that he could trust this strange woman whose voice was sweet and tender, but whose face he had not yet seen. But had he really spoken the truth?

Did he not doubt her? He certainly did. She might be true, might be gentle and generous, but where we do not know all, and understand all, we doubt.

The skeptic who does not truly know God, who has not felt the warmth of His love in his own heart, cannot help doubting. He cannot reason religion into his heart—it must be experienced.

It is so with everything else. What we do not thoroughly understand we cannot help doubting.

"Will you answer me a few questions?" Harry said.

"I cannot say until they are asked."

"Who are you, and what relation do you bear to these murderous outlaws here in, or rather under, the Red House on Dead Man's Bluff?"

"You will understand at some time," she answered, arising gracefully. "Believe me to be your friend. I will save you from a horrible death, if you will but believe and trust in me. Let that suffice for the present."

She retired from the room and he was alone. Long he sat wondering who and what she was.

The longer he reflected the more he seemed to doubt her. Might she not be playing with him as a cat plays with the mouse before she devours it?

That evening she appeared with his supper, consisting of

bread, cakes and fruit upon a tray. This she sat before him upon a small table, and left without exchanging a word.

Two or three days passed, and she paid him regular visits, bringing at each time some provisions.

The mind of the prisoner began to conjure up every possible idea. He even distorted things so as to believe he was in the power of some cannibals who were fattening him for a feast.

This horror, this suspense and this inactivity he could no longer endure.

"I must and will break out of here," he finally declared, "if I have to dig my way with my bare hands through the solid rock to the river of Millbrook."

The Red House, he remembered, stood on the banks of the river, and he supposed that they were directly under that strange building.

He waited until after the third visit of the veiled woman, during the time he supposed to be day, when he made his arrangements for escape.

There were in the room several tallow candles, and, taking one with him and stuffing two more in his pockets, he went to the door, which he found locked.

The detective had studied the art of lock-picking carefully, for it frequently became essential in his business.

He had concealed upon his person a set of burglars' tools. Fortunately for his plan, these had not been discovered, and, producing them, he quickly had the door open.

Harry was good at devices. He took some pasteboard which he found in his prison, and very soon he made a dark lantern.

This he carried in his hand, having the rays all directed downward so it could not be seen at any great distance.

Passing out of the door, he closed it carefully and relocked it. He was now in a long, narrow, crooked passage, along which he crept with all the care and caution he could command.

He reached the great iron door at the end of the passage, which was a complete net-work of great iron bars and springs. After some difficulty he opened the door and passed out into a wider passage.

Along this he crept for a great distance, his heart beating wildly, for he knew not where he was going.

He heard footsteps approaching, and looked about for some means of hiding. There was a small niche in the wall which would contain him, and he sprang into this. For fear that his light would betray him he extinguished it.

On came the footsteps nearer and nearer. They had to pass within a foot of him and would he be discovered?

CHAPTER XIII.

WANDERING IN THE DARK.

Harry Grinell scarcely breathed as he heard those footsteps advancing. There was more than one, he was satisfied from the first, and soon they were near enough for him to hear the low murmur of voices.

"There are but two of them," the detective said to himself; "and before I will be taken I will die."

He had no weapons of defense save those nature had given him, but then a strong determined man is an adversary to fear, even if he is wholly unarmed.

The young detective, however, kept close in the niche and listened with all the powers of hearing he possessed.

"I don't believe it," said one voice, evidently in answer to something his companion had said.

Those voices sounded natural enough; but the concealed man could see by the aid of a small lamp one of the men carried that they were masked and costumed most hideously.

"Why?" asked the companion of the man who had declared he didn't believe it.

"Dawson only said it to get out of a scrape himself."

"What kind of a scrape?"

"What kind of a scrape? I should think you would know. He would be in a terrible fix if it became known that he had not stood over the body until it was dead or had revived."

"Well, he swears that he did. But when the body was dead he dropped it into the sink."

"Well, now, Cal, don't you know that that fellow was too young, and had too good a constitution to succumb to as small an amount of torture as was put upon him? Our high chief and king had determined from this fellow to find out something of the whereabouts of that renegade who knows all our signs and secrets. He didn't intend to kill him, and when we were all called away by that other event, we supposed he would revive."

"But suppose he did revive and escaped?"

"Well, he would be hiding somewhere among the thousand vaults about this place."

"Couldn't he get out?"

"No."

"Why?"

"A mouse couldn't get out o' these underground vaults and dungeons without help. Somebody 'd have to go along with keys and unlock the doors for it."

"But might he not have skeleton keys?"

"Well, hardly likely. Even if he did have such things, none would fit the great outer lock."

"Then it's your opinion that the fellow is somewhere in here?"

"It is."

"Well, suppose we find him, what then?"

"Why, it'll git Dawson in a fix. He will have to die."

"Then of course Dawson will do everything he can to keep us from finding him."

"Yes."

The men had been walking slowly by during this short dialogue, and were now so far away that our hero could not hear what more they had to say.

He trembled violently as they came near him, so near that he could have reached out his hand and touched them. He held his breath, for to have spoken or breathed aloud would have insured his discovery, and discovery would have been death.

He started from the niche as soon as the goblins—he could scarcely call them men—had passed.

"I wish I could have heard all they said," thought Harry. "Would it not be just as prudent and as safe to follow them as to go any other course? By their conversation I might get some information which would prove of infinite value to me."

To think was to act with Harry.

The two strange individuals were already some distance down the great passage, and he started after them swiftly, and with footsteps as light and noiseless as a cat's.

What was his surprise and astonishment to see them suddenly disappear! How and where they had gone he did not know, nor could he even guess. They just seemed to either sink into the ground or vanish into air.

"It won't do to follow them any farther," said Harry.

Where now should he go? Alas! he knew not.

Death and destruction seemed to environ him on every side. He was liable at any moment to stagger upon some of these underground demons, and they would not hesitate to drag him at once to a terrible death.

It would have been better to trust the strange veiled woman than to brave the dangers of these catacombs.

There seemed hundreds of vaults, passages and underground apartments.

He found some of them dimly lighted by small lamps or the faint glow of that strange white light.

At last he came to an apartment. A feeble lamp was burning within it. He saw that the door was ajar, and he crept noiselessly forward and listened to see if he could hear any voices within.

No; all was silent as the grave. Could any one be within?

He must know to a certainty before he ventured to look in. Listening until he was fully satisfied that no one was there, as he could not even hear any breathing, he ventured to pull the door open and take a peep into the apartment.

One glance and an involuntary cry of horror escaped his lips.

Well it might. The sight which there met his eyes beggars description. Never had he seen anything so horrible.

The floor of the apartment was flagstones laid loosely down, the walls made of large round stones of a strange uniform size.

The ceiling was stone, and from the centre of it depended a large iron hook.

To this hook was the body of a man, hanging by one hand, and his throat cut almost from ear to ear.

The upper part of his body was naked, showing a thousand wounds and bruises, the result of some horrible torture inflicted before his throat had been cut and death resulted.

The sight could not have been more ghastly. The blood had flowed down the sides of the neck and breast from the great gaping wound; the mouth was open, and from the corners blood had run in small streams and dried, while a great pool of clotted blood was on the floor beneath, having run down the body in a torrent.

The whole scene was made far more ghastly and horrible than it naturally would have been by the faint glimmering lamp, which burned from the small bracket in the wall.

Strangely fascinated by this horrible sight, he once more turned his eyes upon it. Oh, horrible—horrible indeed!

Long he stood there looking—looking at the terrible thing, his blood seeming to freeze and clot as the blood of the victim before him.

The head had dropped upon one side of the body as it hung and there seemed a horrible grin upon that gaping mouth, while those dead, staring eyes seemed to be living coals of fire.

At last he tore himself away, and, with another horrible yell, he ran down the dark passage. Whither he was going he knew not, nor did he care, so that he got away from that horrible sight.

He turned again and again into some winding passage, and at last dashed past a door which was closed. Through a peephole in the door came a faint stream of light, and he heard voices within as if they were engaged in an animated discussion.

A shout arose within as his flying footsteps were heard.

"There is danger now," gasped Harry, and he ran forward along the dark passage as fast as he could, turned abruptly to the left into the next, and then a few minutes later into the right, and ran on thus until exhausted, confused and bewildered, he stumbled and fell into a small shallow pit at one side of the passage.

He was stunned, but not insensible, and in an instant had regained his presence of mind.

The pit, although shallow, was dark, and a few loose boards had been thrown over the top.

He had just raised himself to a sitting posture and was rubbing the side of his head which had come in contact with a rock, when he heard footsteps approaching rapidly, and saw the rays of a lantern dance along the walls of a passage.

"Come on, come on," cried a voice.

"Oh, it was nothin'," said another, evidently a few paces in the rear.

"I swear it was. I heard him running, whoever it was."

"So did I," said a third voice. "They war a-goin' like thunder."

"They ran right down here."

"Who was it?"

"Don't know."

"It must a-been one o' our own guards."

"Well, what was he runnin' so fast for? I tell you it warn't."

"Well, what was it, then?"

"One o' them things heerd so much o' late."

"Bosh! yer gittin' superstitious, Jake."

"No, I ain't."

"Why are ye always talkin' about strange sights and scenes?"

"Because they are seen and heard, and if there is one spot on earth, or under it, which from its hellishness deserves to be haunted, it's this underground hole."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE PRISONERS.

The concealed detective trembled with fear and horror.

When fear and horror are sufficient to make a detective of Harry Grinnell's experience tremble it must be terrible.

But the sights he had seen, the experiences he had had, were enough to make the bravest shudder.

"Stop!" said one of the men hurrying up.

"Why?" asked another.

"Let's examine this pit."

"No, he's not in there."

"Well, he may be."

"He is not; I know it. He couldn't have got in there by any means. It was simply impossible."

"Why not?"

"Because he's not had time. He was just running down here like lightning the last seen of him. He wasn't takin' time to hide anywhere."

"Well, then, go on. I don't believe it was any one."

The footsteps had no sooner died away down the corridor than the fugitive crept out of his temporary hiding-place, and, with feelings which must have been something like those of a mouse when in a room from which there is no escape, and a deadly cat is on its track, he started in an opposite direction from that taken by his pursuers.

"Great Heaven!" he gasped. "Was ever mortal man in such peril? I am caught like a rat in a trap. There seems no escape from these catacombs. There are a thousand passages,

and if I possessed the means of opening the doors, I would certainly get lost and perish before I reached them. Better, far better, would it have been to trust the veiled woman. God knows I could not have been worse off there than I am here."

He was yet to learn a great deal more of the horrors of the place in which he was lost. That was the most wonderful cavern or caverns ever discovered in the history of the world.

As he was going along a passage he saw a lamp away in the distance. This did not alarm him, for he had come to learn the fact that lamps were put about in various places to light up the passages.

When he came to the lamp he crouched close to the wall and glided by as quickly as possible to bury himself in the darkness beyond. His greatest safety lay in keeping in the darkness.

He hurried on, going he knew not whither, but feeling only that nervous impulse to fly.

Suddenly he heard footsteps ahead of him. Some one was coming directly toward him.

He paused and pressed himself as close as he possibly could against the wall.

"Cal," said the voice of one of the first men he had encountered after his escape.

"Whist!" answered his companion.

"He is somewhere close."

"Yes."

"I'd swear it."

"So would I."

"I knew he'd have to come down this way, and it was a good idea to watch that lamp."

"It was."

"I saw him, and it was the fellow we thought killed. We must get him and cut Dawson's throat. It will serve him right for not guarding his prisoner better."

"Well, he's here; be careful now. You feel on that side and I'll go along this wall."

Detection, arrest and death now seemed inevitable to the fugitive.

"Good and kind Heavenly Father," he mentally ejaculated, "Thou who dost never desert Thy children, aid me now. I can do nothing without Thy aid."

It was too dark for the detectives to see each other, or any object two paces away.

The lamp about two hundred paces down the corridor seemed to blind them rather than give them any light.

Our hero now nerved himself for one of the most trying adventures of his life. He seemed to instinctively feel the presence of his enemies and would-be destroyers.

He had heard their carefully arranged plan.

The goblins had supposed, and very reasonably, too, that the fugitive would crouch close to the wall, which he certainly would have done had he not overheard their plans of search.

He advanced into the middle of the passage and lay down on the hard floor.

The two men went groping along in the darkness, feeling everywhere. Now they are on each side of the motionless man, who lies straight and rigid, as if he had been hewn out of stone.

They felt all along the wall, and even passed their hands directly over Harry, within five or six inches of his body, but not touching him.

They went on, and he, waiting until they were a few paces away, softly arose with that wonderful nerve he possessed, and crept noiselessly away.

The farther away he got the faster he went.

He had wandered about among the catacombs for an hour, when he came to a door opening into an apartment.

This door, like the other, was ajar, but peeping in, he did not discover any such horrors as had met his eyes before.

This had its horrors, without a doubt. There were evidences of them all along the walls.

There hung grinning, ghastly skeletons, but no fresh butchery could be discovered.

He entered the apartment, closing the great iron door, and, to his joy, finding a large cross-bar inside, he was enabled to bolt it securely.

"I can rest here," he said.

A deep, hollow groan startled him. It seemed to proceed from the wall.

He gazed around upon the walls, which were of large round or oblong stones.

A small lamp hung from a hook in the wall, giving forth a rather feeble light.

"I must have been mistaken," he said. "It was not a groan; only my imagination conjured up such fancies."

Again the groan came from the wall, so hollow, so terrible, as to almost freeze his blood.

He now began to inspect it.

He had not gone far on his rounds before he started back with horror.

There, transfixed in the wall, stuck into it, as it were, was a young man or boy.

Only his head was visible, and he looked as if he had been built right into the wall with it.

Upon a closer examination he recognized the features of the lad as one whom he had met at the village of Millbrook. He was inclosed, as it were, in a stone case, a case perhaps made of cement and plaster paris.

No part of him was visible save the head. The rest was completely inclosed in the stone case.

The lad was almost insensible, and had evidently been suffering the most excruciating pain.

This boy was none other than our friend Jerry Blackman, who was captured as we have seen. Upon a still closer examination Harry Grinell discovered that the case which inclosed him was only laid up in a niche in the wall.

"Do you know me?" he asked, placing his hand on Jerry's face.

Jerry opened his eyes feebly, and said:

"Do not expect me to talk. I have been turned to stone."

"No, you are not."

"Yes, I am. I was going through the enchanted forest and looked behind me against strict instructions not to do so, and I was instantly turned to stone."

"Well, I can disenchant you."

"Oh, do!"

"Would you like to be a boy again—a human being?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

Harry lifted him down from the niche in the wall, and, seizing a large stone, cracked the casing as a boy would a nut, and Jerry Blackman rolled out of it, just as the kernel of a nut would fall out of the shell.

"What does this all mean?" Jerry said, rubbing his head and trying to collect his scattered faculties.

"Do you feel better?"

"Yes."

"Are you not almost yourself again?"

"No; but I begin to realize now that the fiends perpetrated some horrible trick upon me. There was chloroform and mesmerism in it. I feel their effects yet. But we are free now, are we not?"

Harry shook his head.

"What, not free?" Jerry asked.

"No," said Harry, "we are still prisoners; but, there being two of us, we have now more show for life and liberty than we had."

CHAPTER XV.

A BOLD STROKE FOR LIBERTY.

Jerry Blackman by the assistance of his new friend got upon his feet and gazed about him in a stupefied, confused manner.

He leaned against the wall and pressed his head between his hands. He felt that peculiar dead sensation, a benumbing, confused feeling, experienced when one recovers from some horrible nightmare.

There was more.

There was the recollection—aye, a most vivid recollection—of the horrible dream he had dreamed. He could hardly believe he was not enchanted and turned to stone.

He could hardly regard Harry Grinell in any other light than as some fairy king who had come to break the spell which had been put upon him.

Harry went to the door and watched and listened, while Jerry strove to recover his equanimity of mind.

He sat down upon a stone and tried to think.

He still had a confused idea of the deer hunt. He seemed, however, to have only dreamed that, and he could hardly realize that he was not yet a stone. But how could a stone talk and walk about?

"Curse their enchantment, spells and drugs," he muttered.

Harry now came to his side and said:

"How do you feel by this time?"

"Better."

"Your head is not quite clear yet?"

"No, no; everything is so confused I can't get it all straight somehow. I don't really know who I am!"

"Well, I do."

"You would certainly confer a great favor upon me by telling me."

"You are a young man whom I remember meeting at Millbrook."

"Yes, that is familiar. I remember something now about the village of Millbrook."

"It is near the Red House."

"Ah, yes," he cried, "I know of the Red House. There is a mystery there."

"True, sir, and we are in the grasp and power of that mystery."

"But my name, I have actually forgotten it. My mind must be in a very feeble condition indeed."

"I think I heard you called Jerry."

"Oh, yes, Jerry Blackman. I remember it now. I was at Millbrook, visiting my friend, Henry Larkmore."

"I can't say what was your business there, for I am almost a total stranger in Millbrook."

"Yes, yes," Jerry went on, as the past gradually burst into view upon the tablets of his memory. "Henry and I went on a hunt. I shot a deer, pursued it, was cheated out of it by an old woman whom we met in the forest. On my way back, passing through the enchanted forest, I looked back, and was turned to stone."

Harry laughed.

"You cannot believe anything so absurd and ridiculous?" he said. "A young man like you, with your education, should know that the powers to enchant and turn men to stone only dwell in the imagination of some author, and not in reality."

"Yes, I know."

"Then why don't you give it up?"

"Oh, sir, it was so much like a reality that I could hardly believe it was not real."

"But it was not."

"I am glad, for I do know it was only a trick—and yet it was a well-performed trick."

"I hope you will soon be able to go. Outside this room you would feel better."

Jerry still looked bewildered.

Fixing his eyes upon our hero in a strange way, he said:

"Tell me where we are, and how you came here?"

Harry proceeded in as few words as possible to relate his own experience at the Red House and since he had been among the catacombs beneath.

They then discussed the situation at length, and both came to the conclusion that it was critical.

"I only wish that we could find the veiled woman," said Harry at the conclusion. "I once doubted her, but now I have the utmost confidence in her. She could possibly help us out of this dilemma; but as it is our case is bad."

Jerry only groaned.

"Do not be discouraged," said Harry, to revive the boy's spirits. "We can but die if the worst comes."

"Oh, sir," said Jerry, "I have no fears of death, if I could only die. But then to be taken captive, to suffer again those tortures of mind which they inflict upon me—to become a stone even in my own imagination! It is terrible."

"We will never be taken alive. Let us form that resolution, and two desperate, determined men can easily cope with half a dozen of these underground outlaws."

"Are they not masked?" asked Jerry.

"Yes, each wears some mask horribly grotesque, usually representing some animal, bird or reptile."

"That accounts for the monster I saw."

"How was he disguised?"

"He was represented as we usually see the devil in pictures."

"That was one of them," said our hero to the boy. "They have officers, and each mask and costume represents the rank they hold. Their chief or king, as he is known, is disguised as a lion, with a real lion skin upon him. To see them in counsel is a curiosity, they are grotesque and horrible."

Jerry rose to his feet.

"Can you go now?" asked Harry.

"Yes."

"Come on then."

"Where will you go?"

"I cannot tell. We must be prepared for something desperate. We go from here to wander about until some chance of getting out of this demons' nest presents itself."

Then Harry went again to the door and paused and listened. He could hear nothing, and, beckoning Jerry to his side, they each took two large round stones, about the right weight for throwing, and left the strange and ghastly apartment.

As soon as they entered the hall or corridor they bent down to listen.

No one was in sight or hearing.

Then Harry closed the door and fastened it with his skeleton key.

"It will not be long," said Jerry, "until they discover my escape."

"It may be," said our hero. "There are apartments here which I am satisfied have not been visited for years."

"Then they evidently left me here to die?"

"Yes."

"The monsters!" said Jerry with a shudder, "why did they wish to take my life?"

"For your money."

"I had no money when captured."

"Perhaps you knew some of their secrets."

"No, I did not. I never knew anything about them."

"Then your case is indeed a mysterious one. You must have been made some of them enemies."

"I don't know any of them."

"How do you know? They were always masked, were they not?"

"Yes."

"Have you no enemies?"

"None," said Jerry, "not one in all the world—unless," he added, "unless it be Jippy Jerkum."

The two men paused a moment and gazed at each other in the darkness.

There was a world of meaning in that glance. It was gone, and they glided down the long corridor. They found the whole ground, or great stone, as it were, cut up with passages and cross passages and apartments.

They came at last upon one dark pit, apparently bottomless, and, listening at it, they could hear the rush of waters beneath.

"This must be the sink," said Harry, as they drew back in some awe, from the dark abyss.

"Let us move around it and go on," said Jerry.

They started around the sink, and had come out into another corridor.

It was similar to a dozen others they had seen, save there was a lamp a short distance ahead.

There was a sentry near the lamp, and just a little in advance of the sentry was a flight of steps leading to the world above.

"Jerry," said Harry, in a whisper.

"Well?"

"Do you see that stairway?"

"Yes."

"It leads up to liberty and life. Will you follow me and make one grand, one bold stroke for life and liberty?"

"Yes, Harry, anywhere you lead I will follow."

"There is an armed sentry in the way. We must dispose of him."

Jerry nodded, and the two began to crawl forward.

They make little noise, but the goblin sentry has quick ears and sharp eyes.

He sees them when a few feet away, and, snatching a pistol, fires. The ball grazed our hero's cheek.

"Now!" he shouted, and, hurling their stones against the sentry's armor, those desperate men hurled themselves upon him.

CHAPTER XVI.

BALKED.

One of the stones had evidently struck the sentry on the head. He staggered and came near falling.

Crack! went his pistol again, and Jerry fell.

Harry was now upon him, and felled him at one tremendous blow with the stone he carried.

There was a dagger in the man's belt, and, snatching it, Harry buried it to the very hilt in his heart.

One grasp, one shudder and all was over.

Freedom gained at last, for there was the stairway, and why should he not escape?

But he thought of Jerry.

Was the boy killed or not?

He turned to him and was not a little agreeably surprised to see the brave boy struggling to his feet. He was already upon his hands and knees, and was evidently not seriously hurt.

"Oh, Jerry——"

"Don't," said Jerry, "don't touch me, or you will turn me to stone again."

"I feared you were killed."

"And I thought so; I don't know but what I was right."

Harry examined the boy's wound and found that the bullet had only just grazed his temple.

"No, no, Jerry, you are not seriously hurt, only stunned."

"I began to have a stony feeling again," said Jerry, who by the aid of Harry had got upon his feet. "But what has become of the sentry?"

"There he lies."

"Dead?"

"As a herring."

"Good. The way to life and liberty is clear."

"Yes."

"Then let's go, for Heaven only knows how anxious I am to breathe pure air once more."

"Let's dispose of this sentry first."

"What will we do with him?"

"Drop him in the sink."

"All right."

"But we will keep his arms."

On the sentry they found four revolvers and a dagger.

They took two revolvers each, and Harry Grinell, being the elder and stronger, took the dagger.

"We will be pretty well heeled," said Jerry, somewhat in his old reckless manner, as he examined his pistols.

"Yes indeed we will," answered Harry.

"But woe to these ground hogs if we come on them now."

"We must avoid them, Jerry," said Harry. "That is why I want to drop this dead man in the sink. If he should be discovered here they would know we had escaped, and might get a hold on us, even after we got to the world above."

"By the holy poker, if ever I get my foot on the outside crust of this mundane sphere I'll not stop this side of Philadelphia."

"Let's put this man out of sight," said our hero; "it will increase our chances."

"All right; but I think we can consider ourselves equal to a dozen of these miserable mock-turtles," said Jerry, grasping the legs of the dead sentry, Jerry having taken the shoulders.

"They all wear an armor, Jerry."

"An armor?"

"Yes, an armor. Don't you feel one on this fellow?"

"Well, I thought him most doggoned heavy."

"He has an armor on, and so have all the others. This armor may be so thick that it will turn a bullet."

"The cowards," growled Jerry, "but I think that I can find some vulnerable point about them, which my bullet will be able to reach."

They carried the dead sentry back to the sink, and, getting him over it, they dropped him in.

There was a faint splash below, and those waters invisible in the depth and darkness, rushed on. The first man of that desperate band, who were the mystery of Dead Man's Bluff, had fallen. The two who had consigned him to his watery grave hoped from the bottom of their hearts that this was in truth and in reality the beginning of the end of those monsters.

"Now, Harry," said Jerry Blackman, as familiarly as if they had known each other for years, "let's make our way to liberty."

"First, Jerry, let us examine our weapons and see if they are all in good order."

"That would be almost impossible in this darkness."

"Do it by the sense of feeling, Jerry; we can not afford to pause long enough near one of those lights to make an examination of them."

Jerry was about to make a reply when suddenly he was seized by his companion and dragged back to the wall.

Harry's hand was on his mouth so as to prevent any speech or outcry. To say that the boy was astonished would be but a tame way of expressing his feelings.

He was almost thunderstruck, and concluded that his new friend was either playing a practical joke on him or had suddenly grown mad, and was about to hurl him into the sink.

But a moment later when he heard distinctly approaching footsteps he fully comprehended the strange conduct of the detective.

The footsteps were approaching rapidly, and an audible "Whist!" was distinctly heard.

"Be careful, the sink is near," said a voice in a whisper.

"So it is, but it is railed in," answered another voice.

"I know, but you might tumble over the rail, and once tumble in there and all is up."

"I suppose there would be no chance whatever to get out?"

"Not the least."

"How deep is it?"

"I don't know."

"Some one said it was fifty feet to the water."

"I don't think it's so deep."

"Whist!"

A moment's silence, and then a voice in the faintest whisper says:

"What is it?"

"Didn't you hear nothing?"

"No; did you?"

"Yes."

"What did it sound like?"

"Some one breathing."

"Oh, nonsense."

"Well, there might be some one around here."

"What if there was?"

"It would be the very one we are after."

"Who?"

"Who? why, that infernal detective, of course."

"Ha, ha, ha! have you got that wild nightmare, too?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you still believe that Harry Grinell, the detective, escaped?"

"Yes, of course I do; and so do at least two-thirds of our band."

"Then at least two-thirds of our band are crazy. Don't you know Dawson swears he dropped the body in the sink?"

"Yes, but if the prisoner escaped through Dawson's negligence he would be put to death, and he could manufacture such a story very readily to save his own life."

"Not probable, but possible."

"Well, suppose the prisoner is alive, what then?"

"Why, he is somewhere among these catacombs hiding. Some are satisfied that they have seen him."

"Bosh! that was only the nightmare."

"Well, come on, then, I shall keep a good lookout."

At this moment there came the ringing of bells in the distance.

They were evidently small bells worked by electricity.

"Hello, what's that?" said the first speaker.

"The alarm signal."

"Where is it?"

"Everywhere."

"And what does it mean?"

"It means for every one to get to posts and guard them as soon as possible."

The masked scoundrels were gone, and our friends could only wonder and tremble.

"We're in a bad box," said Jerry.

"Yes, and not so bad as either one of us has been in. The cause of this alarm may be the discovery of your escape."

"That's so. I hope it's no more serious, but those rascals have gone direct to the spot where the sentry stood. If he should be missed——"

"They can conjecture a thousand reasons," said Harry. "Come and let's make our way to the stairway and get out or die."

The two young, determined men, with a pistol in each hand, set out toward the door.

There were warning shouts on every side, heard faintly from afar, while the constant ringing of bells could be heard.

"Jerry?" said Harry.

"Yes, sir."

"Keep at my side."

"I am, sir."

"Something of consequence has happened. They would not raise such a fuss as this on any ordinary affair."

"No."

They hurried down a long, dark corridor as fast as they could.

They passed the entrance to several other tunnels, way down which lamps could be seen burning. At every one of these could be heard the ringing of bells.

At last they reached the large dome-shaped place where they had found the sentry, and Harry by a gesture stopped his comrade and went forward to reconnoiter.

There around the stairsteps stood a dozen heavily-armed and grotesquely-masked men.

"Balked!" groaned Harry, stepping back to the side of his young companion.

CHAPTER XVII.

SEARCH FOR THE MISSING YOUTH.

The village of Millbrook was thrown into the wildest confusion by the strange disappearance of Jerry Blackman.

When Henry Larkmore, his companion on that fatal hunt, returned that night without his companion, it was supposed by all that he would be in by morning.

But when morning and the next morning came and still the youth did not return, there was considerable alarm.

"It's just what becomes of everybody who crosses Jippy Jerkum," said Henry Larkmore. "They always have something happen them strangely."

"Hush, Henry," said his father. "Go in the house, and remain there until you learn to use your tongue with more discretion."

They were in the carpenter shop of Nick Blumer. It was early morning, and the carpenter sat in his shirt sleeves on his bench conversing with Neil Otis, when Henry and his father entered. Neil's blacksmith shop was a next-door neighbor to Blumer's carpenter shop, and, being good friends, they frequently met before going to work to discuss the news of the day.

"I don't know but what the boy's about right," said Otis, a flash of defiance in his dark eyes.

"Well, all I know," said the carpenter, taking up a plane and laying it on its back, feeling the edge with his forefinger; "all I know, I repeat, is that there are some strange things goin' on in this world."

"Where did Henry last see Jerry?" Otis asked of Mr. Larkmore.

"He last saw him in the forest. He had shot at a deer and was pursuing it."

"Well, I'll bet——" began Otis.

"What?" asked both Mr. Larkmore and Blumer.

"I'll bet he started back through that enchanted forest, and if he did it's the end o' him."

"There is no more enchantment about that forest than any other," said Mr. Larkmore.

"Well, mebbe there ain't, but ye wouldn't catch me goin' near it fur nothin' in the world, day or night," said Otis.

"I must confess," said the carpenter, "that I have no special anxiety to brave the power of those monsters, be they men or devils, who inhabit the enchanted forest."

"Well, will nothin' be done to find the boy?" said Otis.

"Yes," said Mr. Larkmore. "I am going to raise a party at once, and scour the woods far and near for him and find him."

"Have ye writ to his people about it?"

"No, I don't want to alarm his parents needlessly. It may be he will be found all right yet, and then if they did know of his absence they could not get here in time to do any good."

"That's so."

"If the lad's dead, he's dead. If he is alive we will find him."

"Glory in yer spunk," said both mechanics.

"I came to see if you two men could not be induced to join us."

"In course," said Nick Blumer. "We'll do anything but make another search in that infernal Red House."

"By the way," said Mr. Larkmore, "is not this the second strange disappearance from Millbrook?"

"Who else?" asked Otis.

"That strange young man, who came here and boarded at old Butts' tavern about the time of Miss Daily's arrival here."

"The last seen of him he was goin' toward the Red House on Dead Man's Bluff," said Blumer.

"Then, blast it, he ought never to be heard from again. Any man who's got no more sense than that ought never to be heard of."

"Be ready at one o'clock sharp," said Mr. Larkmore.

Both the mechanics assented, and began at once to hunt up their rifles and pistols.

"If some livin' devil's got anything to do with this, why we'll watch 'em. Ef it's a dead one, why lead'll not hurt 'em bad."

Henry Larkmore did not go in the house as his father had directed him, but instead wandered down the street.

"Jippy Jerkum is some way at the bottom of this," he said to himself. "It's no use any one denying it. All his enemies disappear so mysteriously."

At this moment he saw the dandy-looking lawyer going down the street, twisting his short, stubby mustache. He wore a soft felt hat in a sort of a rakish manner, a short cut-away coat, tight pantaloons, and large heavy boots, the soles of which were very thick and broad.

Jippy paused at the foot of the stairway which led up to his office, and stood with his head bowed as if in deep thought.

"I suppose he does not see me, the scoundrel," said Henry;

"I want to pass him without speaking to the scoundrel."

Jippy did not seem to see him until he had passed him two or three paces.

Then suddenly raising his head, he said:

"I say, Henry."

"Yes, sir," said Henry, pausing and turning his face upon him.

Jippy Jerkum did not shrink. He could be as bold and defiant as the most righteous, upright man on the face of the globe, and it was no use to try to look him out of countenance.

"What is all this I hear about your friend Jerry Blackman being lost?"

"He is lost, sir."

"How?"

"In the woods. He and I went hunting, and Jerry has not come back."

The lawyer was twirling his mustache and clearing his throat by little ahems.

"Do you have no idea what became of him?"

"No."

"Well, that's a little strange."

"Yes, sir; a great many strange things happen nowadays," said Henry, and he walked on.

He fancied he saw a gleam of triumph in the wicked eye of the man who stood on the doorstep twirling his mustache.

"Why not watch him?" said Henry. "I know that he knows what the fate of Jerry Blackman was, and if one was to keep an eye on him he might even yet find out."

That evening Mr. Larkmore with a dozen men and Henry set out into the forest to hunt for the missing youth.

They were all armed with guns and pistols, for there had been some bold robberies perpetrated in the forest.

There was a superstitious horror among some of the villagers of being caught out in that portion of the forest, said to be haunted or enchanted, during the night.

Strange sights and sounds had been seen and heard there, and no one among the ignorant portion of the village could be argued out of the idea of there being something supernatural about it.

"I'd rather be sleepin' around a graveyard," said a tall fellow named Chet Arthur.

"Why, Chet?" asked Nick Blumer.

"'Cause it's chuck full o' ghosts."

"I believe ye."

"They had come to the spot where Jerry Blackman had shot the deer."

"Right here," said Henry Larkmore, "is the last place I saw him."

"Which way did he go?"

"That way," said Henry, pointing across the small bottom-land. "The deer stood just in the edge of those bushes; when he fired it sprang right up in the air and started to run. Jerry took after it."

"You never heard any more of him?"

"Oh, yes I did; I heard him away a mile or more, running after the deer, but I never saw him again."

"Then our best show is to get on the trail of that wounded deer and follow it up," said Mr. Larkmore.

"Yes."

"Now, who among you are best at following the trail?"

Two hunters named Simmons and Gilstrap were put upon the trail, and the others followed close after them.

It was very easy to follow. The drops of blood were a sure guide, and they proceeded without difficulty until they came to the spot where Jerry Blackman had encountered the strange woman.

"There's been a fight here," said Simmons, "jest as sure as yer born. Here's signs o' a struggle."

Gilstrap, who had been looking about, saw where the deer had gone on, dragging some person or thing after it.

He called to the others to follow him, and plunged into the woods.

"Come on, boys, she's gittin' broader and broader," cried the hunter. "Ye kin jest bet the deer hez gored him to death."

The companions of the hunter followed him in almost breathless silence.

For half a mile they tore through the thick bushes, and at last came out on the banks of a small creek. Here was a great pool of blood which had run into and discolored the clear water, but no dead animal or human being was in sight.

"Here it ended," said the hunter named Gilstrap. "Here the buck—and judgin' by his track he war a big one—ended his life."

They carefully examined the banks of the creek and found where footsteps had descended to the water's edge and waded across.

They followed them, and, the hunters keeping on the trail, had gone half a mile when suddenly a tall, powerful-looking woman, with a dress of deer-skin and hideous blazing eyes, great black teeth and long tangled hair, started up before them holding a long knife threateningly.

"Stop there, an' tell a body where ye are goin'!" she cried, so sharp and shrill that every man paused.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MYSTIC WOMAN UNVEILED.

"What is it?" asked Jerry Blackman, cocking his revolver.

"Be careful, very careful," said Harry, laying his hand on the arm of the impulsive youth.

"Are we not discovered?"

"No, I hope not."

"What then did you say?"

"We are balked."

"By that, do you mean——"

"I mean," interrupted Harry, "that at least half a dozen men are now in the place from where we removed the sentry."

"Half a dozen—what are they to two desperate, determined men like ourselves?"

"Hold, Jerry, do not be rash," said the detective, coolly. "They might not be much, they might be only a handful to us but heaven knows how many more of these infernal demons may be laying in wait about here for us. This underground pit of the infernal was not prepared by a few men. Who ever constructed it, even if it was once a natural cavern, was a host in himself."

"Suppose," began Jerry, in a whisper, but he stopped. There arose a shout around the corner of the subterranean passage and an angry voice could be heard, saying:

"You lie, Dawson; you have deceived us. Some one is loose in our catacomb, and it could be none other than Harry Grinell, the detective, whom you say you threw into the pit."

"I swear——"

"Swear not at all, you perjured dog. You lie, lie most furiously. Now die——"

"Hold, king of beasts!" cried another, and, peering around from their hiding-place at the weird-looking goblins, Harry and Jerry saw a strangely-attired, monstrous-looking personage enter. He wore a leopard's skin and had the head of a leopard.

"What is it?" the king demanded.

"The youth confined in the stone casement and put on the niche in the wall has escaped."

"The deuce!" roared the lion.

"'Tis true, king. The casing about him is cracked, crushed and broken and he gone."

"Who did it?"

"There are no traitors among us, king," said one of his loyal subjects, a huge turtle-formed man.

"No, no traitors," said the man in lion's skin, called the king. "No traitors and yet there is a man escaped most mysteriously. Could he have done it without help?"

"Certainly not," answered he who had brought the news of the escape.

"Then who aided him?"

All were silent.

"I will tell you who it was," roared the king, becoming more and more enraged every moment. Dawson, who wore the mask and costume of a huge owl, became terribly frightened. He trembled like a leaf. "It was that infernal detective whom we were made to believe was dead and thrown in the sink. Men and animals as you are, what shall be the fate of him who failed to do his duty?"

"Death!" was the answer in a terrible roar.

"Then, Dawson, come——"

There was a rush of footsteps and our friends, who were peering from behind the great corner of stone, saw a man disguised as an owl, running.

"Ho! stop him, stop him!" cried a dozen voices.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Shots rang out lively, filling those vast subterranean passages with hundreds of echoes.

But the flying man ran on.

"Down him!" cried the person dressed in the lion's skin and mask, speaking in tones almost as hoarse and deep as the animal he represented. "Don't let him get away in those dark passages; he may roam about there for years without our being able to find him."

Crack!

Crack!

Crack! came three more shots.

The old man was seen to clap his hand to his left shoulder as if it stung.

Then, whipping out his revolver, he turned about and fired. One of his pursuers was seen to leap into the air and fall dead upon the floor.

"Good!" said the detective, "that was an excellent shot. By Jove, I like the fellow's grit."

"He's coming this way," cried Jerry.

It was an alarming discovery. The fugitive was flying directly toward them.

They drew a pistol in each hand and waited, hardly knowing what to do.

"We could make a good defense if he would join us," said Henry, eager for a fight.

"You are entirely too reckless, Henry," said our hero. "We must not risk a fight here. We don't know how much backing they may have."

"That's so."

"We might wait until that fellow comes up and then give 'em a volley. It will check them somewhat."

The man was coming on a dead run, holding a pistol in each hand.

Soon he was abreast of the detective, who, in a quick, clear whisper, said:

"Stop, we are friends, about face, and let's give them a volley and retreat in good order."

Poor Dawson was willing to accept anybody as a comrade now.

He wheeled about and the three men, with six deadly pistols, waited until their pursuers were within thirty paces, when Harry Grinnell cried:

"Fire!"

There was a rattling crash of firearms, which sounded like a continuous engagement among the oft-repeated echoes of the cavern.

There were cries of rage, pain and astonishment and our two friends had the satisfaction of seeing two or three of their foes fall either dead or badly wounded.

"Away, away," whispered Dawson. "Hide yourselves in some of the grottoes or you will be lost."

He ran and they followed him.

"Jerry?" whispered Harry.

"Yes, sir."

"We are pursued."

"Yes."

"Keep close to me, we shall die together. That other fellow can go where he chooses."

"I will."

"This way."

They turned abruptly to the right and were running along a very narrow passage, when a voice suddenly said:

"Stop, pray!"

It was a sweet, calm voice, sounding as clear and distinct as a silver bell, a voice which thrilled our hero when he heard it.

The very same voice he had heard before, when strapped down upon the stone floor, and all the tortures fiends could invent heaped upon him.

It was the strange veiled woman.

If ever Harry Grinnell had really doubted her, he doubted her no longer. His late terrible experience since his escape from the secret chamber had convinced him beyond a doubt that she was true and honest.

"Come this way!" she whispered.

The detective did not hesitate to follow her, and Jerry, knowing that wherever his companion went was safety, followed him.

The slight form hurried along before them, tripping noiselessly through the dark corridors, as if she had been familiar with them all her life.

Suddenly she paused, touched a hidden spring and the next moment a panel of stone glided aside, revealing what was an opening large enough to admit a man in a stooping position.

"Pass in quickly," she said.

They did so and found themselves in a passage much narrower than the first and so dark they could see nothing.

"Wait a moment," was whispered in those thrilling, silvery tones.

Then a form was heard gliding by them. Her clothes just brushed Harry Grinnell. A moment later and that strange white light lit the corridor just enough for them to see their way. They went along a passage so low they were compelled to stoop.

At last they came to where it was higher, then to a great iron door. She opened this with a key and they saw a small swivel pointing into the passage.

Our friends entered a large, luxuriously furnished apartment.

Their strange benefactress closed the great iron door and

then removed the veil from her face. Both Harry Grinnell and Jerry Blackman started back in surprise.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE STRANGE WOMAN OF THE FOREST.

Mr. Larkmore and his party were completely astounded at sight of this warlike Amazon. Her voice was masculine and she seemed as strong as a lion. Her eyes, great, strange, mild orbs, seemed to pierce every man.

"Who are you?" she demanded, fixing her eyes on Mr. Larkmore.

"I am Alexander Larkmore, of Millbrook," he answered, very politely, for he did not care to excite the ire of this vixen.

"Who are these with you?"

"Friends and neighbors," was the mild, almost submissive, answer.

"Well, what are ye doin' out here in the woods?"

"We are hunting for a young man."

"A young man lost?" she asked, as she turned her fierce eyes on the ground.

"Yes, madam, a young man lost."

"Almost a boy, was he not?"

"That is so," said Mr. Larkmore. "He was just entering the stage of manhood, even if he could be called a man. Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"On the evening when he was lost."

"Where was he?"

"He had shot a deer, but I killed it. We had a tussle for the deer, and it having been only stunned by my shot, tried to run off, but I caught it and dragged it away off to the creek, where I cut its throat."

"Did you never see him after that?"

"No."

"Have you any idea of what became of him?"

"No—yes—that is, stranger, I don't know anything about it."

And then this mysterious huntress thrust her hand into an old greasy pocket, and, drawing out a plug of "pig-tail" tobacco, took a "chaw" in a most masculine manner and handed the plug to Mr. Larkmore.

"Hev a chaw," she said.

Mr. Larkmore thanked her. He did not use the weed.

Some of the men did and she seemed to regard it as the Indians do smoking the pipe of peace.

Then, sitting down on the log in a masculine manner, she began to chew and expectorate vigorously as if her mind was occupied and depended upon its energy for the rapidity with which her jaws moved.

Mr. Larkmore stood and gazed in silence on this rather repulsive personage. Who was she and how long had she lived in these woods? He had heard something of this huntress before, but this was the first time he knew she was a reality.

That the strange being knew something of the missing boy he had no doubt, but whether it was direct or formulated knowledge he was not clear.

"You say you know nothing about Jerry Blackman?" he said.

"Yes, sir, I said I didn't know nothin' about him."

"Have you any idea or suspicion as to his fate?"

"Suspicious don't amount to nothin'," growled the huntress, holding her rifle between her knees.

"But if you had any suspicions they might have some effect in leading us in the right direction."

"No."

The answer was quick and sullen.

"How long have you been here?"

"Right here?"

"No, about here in these woods?"

"Oh, a long time."

"Do you know a part of this forest is enchanted?"

A smile, which was very near a sneer of scorn, flitted over the face of the woman. It was evident that she was incredulous as to any stories of enchantment which might be afloat.

"Oh, yes, I know it's enchanted," she finally said.

"Do you ever go near those woods?"

"Yes, sometimes I chase a deer pretty near to 'em."

"But never venture in them?"

"Oh, no."

"May not this young man have fallen a victim to some of the devilish spells of the wizards who inhabit this enchanted forest?"

"There ain't no doubt on it, stranger," said the woman, ex-
pectorating in a most masculine manner.

Her tone and manner was now one of earnestness.

"Do you live all alone in the woods?" Mr. Larkmore asked.

"Mostly."

"Where is your house?"

"Oh, I've got several."

"Do you build them yourself?"

"Yes."

"Out of logs?"

"No, principally sticks an' the bark from trees."

"Then you are a huntress?"

"Yer bet."

"May I ask your name?"

"Oh, y-a-s, ye kin ax me anything ye want to an' I'll answer
jest sich as I please."

She looked up at the speaker with a grin which displayed her
great fang-like teeth.

"Will you tell me your name?"

"Oh, I have got several; the one I like best is Tiger Jane, the
vixen o' the forest."

"That is only a sobriquet, I presume."

"I don't know what ye mean by a sou-bree-ka. I never saw
her."

"A nickname, I suppose it is—only a nickname."

"Y-e-s, ye kin call it that if we want to."

"How long do you intend to stay here?"

"Don't know, stranger," she answered, somewhat gravely;
"ain't got no lease or nothin'."

"How do you live out here alone?"

"On wittals principally."

"You are rather a shrewd person, Jane—did you know it?"

"No."

"Well, you are. You are no fool, either."

"Oh, ye must be mistaken, stranger," and again that pe-
culiar sneer flickered over her face.

"I don't believe you had anything to do with the strange dis-
appearance of Jerry Blackman, however——"

"Thank ye, sir."

"And I would like to get you to assist us in his recovery."

"I'll do all I kin now, ye bet."

"Will you go with us?"

"No."

"Why?"

"'Cause ef we all go together huntin' fur him it'll be the
same as one man, while ef we scatter out we kin git over lots o'
ground in a short time."

"You are right, Jane."

"Course I am; I'm allers right."

"If you find him, dead or alive, bring him to Millbrook."

"Ye bet I will."

There was nothing now to do but for our party to resume
their search, which they regarded as almost useless.

They gathered up their guns, and, retracing their steps, re-
crossed the creek and started on the back track in hopes that
they would get on the return trail of the youth.

No sooner were they out of sight than a strange look came
over the face of the huntress.

It was a knowing smile and she muttered to herself:

"Yes, I know what became of the youth. He has gone the
way so many have gone. Devils, who disgrace the form of
man, have been at work."

She arose from her seat, muttering as she did so:

"I was foolish not to have followed the boy. In my blind
determination to get the deer I failed to watch as I should
have done. But they shall hear from Tiger Jane; yes, I'll know
something of the fate of Jerry Blackman."

She spit out the chew of tobacco she had in her mouth, thrust
her hand once in the old greasy pocket, drew out the pig-tail
plug and took a fresh chew.

"Now I'm fired up and ready for business," she said.

Shouldering her rifle, she started off through the woods at a
rate of speed that was perfectly surprising. She took wonder-
fully long strides and bounded over logs, stooped under
branches, darting hither and thither, with a celerity which
would have done credit to an Indian warrior.

She crossed the creek and at last she came to where a large
dead tree stood in the forest. At the root of the tree lay a
large flat stone, almost square, and about four feet across.

She went to the dead tree and fixed her eyes on what ap-
peared to be a small bullet half buried in the bark and invisible
save upon close inspection.

Withdrawing the ramrod from her rifle, she pushed the bul-
let two or three inches into the dead body of the tree, when the
large flat stone arose like a trapdoor, revealing an opening in
the earth and a flight of steps descending beneath.

Down into the earth Tiger Jane hastened, having first as-
sured herself that she was not seen. Then the great flat stone
descended and lay upon the earth and the bullet again ap-
peared, half buried in the wood of the old dead tree.

Had any person come there a moment after the descent of the
strange huntress, they would only have seen the great rock
lying upon the ground by the side of the tree and a search of a
thousand years might not have revealed the hiding place.

An hour later and the stone again rises.

This time it is a man who appears. He wears a singular
hunter's cap made of foxskin on his head, with the front ar-
ranged so as to have the head and mouth of the animal as if
alive.

He is dressed in hunter's costume of tanned deerskin and
wears a belt about his waist which supports a pair of large
calibre revolvers.

No sooner has this hunter emerged from the earth than the
stone closes up and he leans his long rifle against a bush near
him, while he tugs away with his fingers to straighten out his
matted beard.

His hair and whiskers, of a brownish-red, don't look as if
they had ever been combed.

"Guess I'll git on the trail and see if I kin trace anything
down," he muttered.

Taking up his rifle, he started off at what hunters call a
"lope," and moved at a wonderful speed through the forest.

It was now late in the day; the sun was almost setting.

Having gone in a circuitous route, the hunter was returning,
when he suddenly heard voices and footsteps approaching him.

He dropped behind a leafy bush, while he cocked his rifle and
held it at ready.

There were a dozen or more men approaching him and they
seemed to be debating some question.

"I tell ye I'm in fur goin' home," said one of the men who
was approaching.

"Yer gittin' terrible squeamish," said another. "Nick
Blumer, I believe ye're afraid o' yer own shadder."

"Well, I'm not goin' near them infernal woods to-night and
ye can't drive me to 'em," returned Nick.

"Why?"

"Because I won't."

"Because ye won't is no reason at all."

"It's reason enough to a man as knows me."

"Well, as we don't all know ye, what is it?"

"It means that when I says I won't, by the rod o' Moses, I
won't."

"Well, now ye might tell us what skeered ye, Nick?"

"That's none o' your infernal business."

"It ain't, eh?" cried the other, angrily.

"No, and I've had about all yer jaw I'm a-goin' to take."

"Hush, hush, boys," said another voice, which was Mr. Lark-
more's. "We can do nothing if we commence quarreling. Re-
member that a human being is lost and it is our duty to try if
possible to find him."

"Well, I want none o' his jaw," said Nick.

"I think we had better camp somewhere near here and be
ready to resume that hunt early in the morning."

"Now, Mr. Larkmore, ye talk sense."

"This is as good a place as any."

"Yes, here's a spring and it's the best."

"You'll stay, won't you, Nick?"

"Yes, jest bet, so ye don't take me close to them enchanted
woods."

"Well, we'll camp here and think about it until morning.
Boys, gather up some dry sticks to make a fire."

"They're goin' to camp, eh?" said the strange hunter, who
was crouched within a few feet of them. "Guess I'll intro-
duce myself."

CHAPTER XX.

THE MYSTIC BEAUTY.

Neither Harry Grinell nor Jerry Blackman were prepared
for what they saw when the veil was removed. Their aston-
ishment at beholding a maiden who could not be more than
sixteen or seventeen years of age, with a face like an angel,
can be better imagined than described.

Could it be that this girl, so lovely, so handsome as to far
surpass any belle they had ever known was in any way con-
nected with these mysterious underground bandits?

Having thrown aside her veil, she stood confronting the two
young men, forming a pretty tableau.

Her large, dark eyes and raven black hair, with white skin,

beautiful face and form, were enough to drive any young man, the least inclined to be romantic, crazy.

Fixing her eyes upon our hero a moment, she said:

"Have you no confidence in me?"

"All in the world," Harry answered.

"Then why did you desert me? Why did you leave the apartment where I had placed you?"

Harry hung his head in shame.

"Foolish man, or boy, you came near proving the ruin of us both," said the pretty girl, her face beautiful but reproving.

"I admit I did wrong."

"Why did you do so?"

"I can hardly tell."

"Admit the truth. You did not trust me."

"I—I—that is, I——" stammered the young detective.

"You thought your own shrewdness and judgment preferable to the word of a woman whose face you had never seen, is it not so?"

Harry bowed his head, but was silent.

"Well, I have shown you my face," she said, her silvery voice having a reproving ring in it; "now, can you trust me? Is it not honest? Do I look like a murderess?"

"No—no; heaven knows you do not——" began Harry Grinell.

"Then can you trust me?"

"Yes, with my life. Forgive me for ever having doubted you."

"I have forgiven you or I would not have risked my life to save you."

"Risked your life?"

"Yes, risked my life."

"Would these fiends put you to death if you were discovered?"

"They would."

"Who are you?" asked Jerry.

She fixed her large dark eyes upon him a few moments in a look of stern reproof and then said:

"Do not begin to propound questions, for when you begin to question, you begin to doubt."

"But you promised me once to reveal to me all this mystery."

"I did, but can you not wait? Man has long sneered at the curiosity of women, pointing to Eve as a sample. Her curiosity, they say, led her to taste the forbidden fruit; but are not men inquisitive? Are not men curious? They say women cannot keep a secret. I will, by my conduct, give the lie to that assertion."

"But it is not a desire to prove the falsity of that assertion which prevents you telling me?"

"You are a shrewd one, Mr. Grinell," said the beautiful girl.

"There is some strange mystery about you and you are too humane to retain a secret locked up in your heart which, by revealing, would bring these villains to justice. You do not intend to screen them?"

"No, no! Heaven knows I would not spare one of them. They shall all in good time be brought to justice, but not now. No; all is not in readiness yet."

"How long have you lived here?"

"You shall know in good time."

She sat down in a cushioned chair and the young men being tired with their great exertions and mental strain, followed her example.

"Oh, how hard indeed is our lot!" said Jerry Blackman. "To think we were so near life and liberty and doomed to be hurled back to imprisonment."

"When were you near life and liberty?" asked the beautiful girl.

"When we were so near the stairway."

"Had you reached it, had you succeeded even in forcing the doors above, you could never have made your escape."

"Why?"

"These catacombs are not known to you. There were sentries above who would either have killed you outright or, seizing you, dragged you back to death and torture."

Jerry shuddered.

"Is there no escape?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Have patience and wait."

"But how can one wait when there are so many uncertainties——" began Jerry, in an excited manner.

"Boy, there are many uncertainties here, but there are two certainties," interrupted the beautiful being.

"What are they?" asked Jerry.

"Certain life and liberty if you obey me and certain death if you do not."

Jerry was awed into silence by the grave expression from those large beautiful eyes.

Harry, who had been gazing on the beautiful girl as much as a charmed schoolboy at his sweetheart, said:

"Will you please tell us your name?"

"Call me Nellie," she said.

"Nellie who?"

"Just Nellie for the present; that will be sufficient."

"Pardon me, Nellie, for asking some more questions, and don't think I will doubt you, even if you refuse to answer them."

"What would you know?"

"Can I not even know who you are and why you are in this dungeon of all dungeons on or under earth?"

"You can at the proper time, Mr. Grinell."

"No; call me Harry, if you will not reveal your name to me. If you are to be Nellie I am to be Harry."

"Let it be so then," she said, gravely, without the least perceptible tinge on her cheek. "Now, I wish to intrust you with some secrets of this room and defense, first exacting a promise from you that you will not use them unless attacked and forced to do so."

The promise was given and then she said:

"The doors opening into this apartment, you will see, are guarded each by a small cannon," and she pointed to the two swivels. "These two cannons are both loaded with bullets and shot. They are intended to clear the passage beyond the door, should there be an attack and it be filled up with enemies. There are lanyards there ready fixed and all you have to do is to give them a sharp jerk."

"Would these walls stand the explosion of a cannon?" asked Harry Grinell.

"That has to be tested," said Nellie, as we shall call the strange, beautiful girl. "It is far better to tear down the stones upon your own head—thus seek your own destruction and that of your enemies—than to fall in their hands. Here is a case of weapons," she said, going to what seemed to be a large clothes press, in which hung rifles, pistols, revolvers, swords and daggers. "Take none of these unless compelled to defend yourselves."

"That is a fine assortment of weapons," said Harry. "Why not arm ourselves now?"

"Because you have promised not to do so?"

"But why exact such a promise from us?"

"Do not go to questioning," said Nellie, sternly. "To question is to doubt, to doubt is to distrust and leads to ruin."

"There are some questions I can ask without doubting," said Harry.

"Then such questions you may ask, but I reserve the right to answer only such as I see fit."

"The first question I need hardly ask, for I could answer it myself."

"What is it?"

"You are not alone in this secret?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking at him sharply.

"I mean that you are making a grand move to encompass the ruin of these desperadoes who inhabit the catacombs of the Red House and that you are not alone in that move."

"Well, sir, how do you know this?"

"All the arrangements show the hand of a man in it."

"Well, what if they do?"

"That question, then, is answered. I don't know how many you have aiding you in your enterprise. I am engaged in it myself and if I could be of any service I would gladly help you."

"You can," she said. "There are some things in which you might aid us, but there are secrets which must be kept until the proper time."

"I care nothing for individual secrets. All I desire is to be free to aid in some way in the destruction of these scoundrels."

For a moment the beautiful girl was silent. At last she said:

"I am acting under another and can reveal nothing without his consent."

"I know who you are acting under," said our hero. "I am under the same person."

She looked at him curiously.

"Is it not Jay Gormley, the hermit detective?"

"Do you know him?"

"I do."

"And dare breathe it?"

"To you I do, but all the tortures could not wrench the secret from me for the benefit of the villains who inhabit this place."

There was a strange light in the beautiful eyes of the girl, but before she could make any response there came a series of cries to their ears, mingled with the sharp reports of pistols.

CHAPTER XXI.

SOUNDS BROUGHT BY TELEPHONE.

Harry Grinell was startled at the noises he heard and Jerry Blackman had drawn his revolver.

The strange sound seemed to proceed direct from the solid wall.

"Hush!" cried the mystic Nellie. "Do not speak or breathe aloud. I am going to uncap the telephones and we can hear what is the matter."

She took the leather covering off of three or four bell-shaped telephones, then those wild cries assumed distinct utterances.

"Look out!" came a warning shout.

"There he goes round the corner."

Bang!

"Who fired that shot?"

"I did."

"Is that you, Cal?"

"Yes."

"What has Dawson done?"

"Let that detective get away and shot three or four of our men."

"Turned traitor?"

"Yes."

"Then kill him."

"That's what we are trying to do."

"Where is the villain?"

"Dodging around the corner."

Bang!

"Oh—oh—oh!"

"Who's hit?"

"I am killed."

"Who fired that shot?"

"Dawson; look out, he's mad."

"Kill him; he's just behind that rock."

Crack!

Crack!

"There, he's hit."

"Be careful."

"No, he's hit."

"No, he isn't."

"But I saw him go down."

"Who—Dawson?"

"Yes."

"He's only playin' 'possum."

Crack!

A yell followed.

"There, I told ye so."

"Who shot?"

"Dawson."

"Who did he hit?"

"Bill Carr."

All the above sounds were heard as plainly from that solid stone wall as if the speakers were but a few paces away.

"They must be right on us," said Jerry Blackman.

In a moment Nellie clapped the caps on the telephones and said:

"Do not utter a word while these are on or you will be heard."

Her voice was sharp and reproving, while a frown of impatience and anxiety was on her brow. Jerry Blackman was scarcely more than a boy, with all a boy's curiosity and impatience, while this young girl, thoroughly acquainted with the mystic band of the Red House, was cool.

"I did not know," said Jerry, "they could hear us."

"Of course they can. Can we not hear every word they say?" said Nellie.

"Yes."

"Well, may not their hearing be as acute as ours?"

"Yes, but those sounds seem to proceed out of the solid rock."

"They come through the rock wall and are brought here by means of a nicely arranged telephone wire which runs through the holes cut in the rock."

"Well, will these wonders never cease?" said Jerry, with a perplexed sigh.

Jerry had never seen or heard of a telephone before, for at this date the instrument was but little known.

He was puzzled to know how those bell-shaped instruments could convey sounds so accurately. It was all certainly a great mystery to him.

"How far are they away?" he asked in a whisper.

"A fourth of a mile."

"Take off the caps then; I won't say another word, blast me if I do."

Nellie quickly jerked off the caps from the telephone and upon their ears came a confused noise, which at first was very difficult to make out. After a few moments, however, they made it out to be the clatter of men's feet running about in the large stone corridors.

There was also a confused murmur of voices and an occasional word could be heard distinctly, usually an oath.

"Can't you tell?" was heard plainly.

"What—," began Jerry, but a warning hand was raised by Nellie and the boy, remembering his promise to keep quiet, refrained from further questioning.

"There it is again," came back a voice. "I tell you the cursed den is haunted. Voices are heard, the rock walls speak, and it's time to leave."

"Bosh! Lem Daily, you are crazy."

"Lem Daily!" said Jerry in a deep drawn whisper.

"There it is again."

"What?"

"The voice, fool."

"What did it say?"

"Repeated my name in a whisper."

"It was but the echo of my own."

"I don't believe it."

"You will be in a mad house if you keep on allowing your imagination to get away with you."

"The place is haunted; I tell you stone walls can't speak of themselves."

"But they can give back echoes, which are almost the same as speech."

This seemed to somewhat mollify the man, who had been greatly annoyed by the whisperings of the telephone.

They evidently went off to another part of the cavern.

There had been a low murmuring at one of the other telephones and Harry Grinell put his ear to it to hear what was being said.

"I have my idea about it," said a voice which sounded almost at his ear, evidently spoken in a low tone. What could it mean? The detective placed his ear close to it, the better to gather in the sounds, and held up his forefinger to enjoin silence upon the others in the apartment.

"What is your theory?" he heard a voice ask, evidently in response to the first assertion he had heard.

"We are watched and beset by somebody."

"Well, who can that somebody be?"

"Jasper Wood said that there were secrets about this cavern which he would never give away. That one time he was watching old Sol, as he hurried away along a passage and followed him as he turned. He says that Sol disappeared so mysteriously and quickly that he never could understand it. He must have gone right into the stone wall."

"Well, is your theory that he did?"

"Yes."

"How could he do that?"

"There is a secret passage or passages somewhere about here, which we don't any of us know anything about, and it is into one of these that he disappeared."

"Well, what of that?"

"Why, there are secret passages here then that we don't know anything about."

"Suppose there are, Sol is dead; we killed him and threw him out."

"Yes, but what if he should have had a confederate?"

"A confederate?"

"Yes, a confederate."

"Impossible."

"No, it is not."

"I tell you it is."

"Just think for a moment. Now suppose that old Sol had really had a confederate and suppose there are secret doors and chambers here about which we know absolutely nothing. Suppose that this confederate of old Sol's did and lived in them with a means to get out unknown to us, would it not be easy for them, him, her or it to get out and in, to overlook our work, and, at the right moment, gobble us up?"

"Yes, I see it now, and if all your supposes should be true, we are in a very bad fix."

"They are just as apt to be true as not."

"I can see very well how they might all be true."

"I think it was a bad move."

"What?"

"If we had stuck to the 'queer' alone and not adopted the plan of Daily, robbin' and murderin', we'd a been more safe."

"Yes, we'd a had old Sol with us yit."

"Sol would never go on further than the issuin' of the 'queer'; when they wanted to promote the business one notch higher he wasn't in it at all."

"And because he wouldn't go in it, he was voted to be killed."

"That's so, and since the Red House had a dead man found about it things haven't gone smooth. It don't stand to reason that Daily's plans are good for this part of the country. There's not enough people with money; it's too far west."

"He hoped to catch some big mines."

"Yes, may be one a year. But while we were issuin' the 'queer' by the thousands o' dollars a year—yes, by the millions—and scatterin' it all over the United States, we were perfectly safe."

There was then a silence. The two men had evidently moved away. Our hero put the cap on the telephone and sat down with his head between his hands.

"I am getting at a part of this mystery," he said to himself. "This girl could give me full light into it, but at present I presume she does not care to; I will yet ferret out the scoundrels. They are a cruel set of fiends, who live by murdering and plundering people."

He looked up and saw that Nellie had placed the caps on all the telephones.

Everything had evidently been heard which would be of any advantage to them.

"They are going off to some other part of the cavern," said Nellie, placing a sort of a speaking tube to her ear. "I must watch them."

"Must you leave us?" asked our hero.

"Yes, for the present."

"Can we not go with you?"

"No."

He looked downcast, but the girl was busy and did not notice him.

Jerry had thrown himself upon the sofa, having made up his mind to enjoy his confinement as well as he could, and, taking up a book, began to peruse its pages.

Harry had again bowed his head in his hands and was buried in the deepest, most intense thought.

A light touch on his arm caused him to start up.

By his side stood the mysterious Nellie, her sweet face grave and calm.

"I'm going," said she.

"So soon?"

"Yes."

"Where will you go?"

"I cannot say."

"How long will you stay?"

"I do not know."

He arose from the seat on which he had been sitting. The girl pointing to a cupboard which seemed to be cut into the solid rock, said:

"In there you will find a large supply of provisions."

"Thank you; but, Nellie, oh, Nellie!" he said passionately.

She opened wide her beautiful dark eyes and gave him an inquiring look.

"You are going out into danger, are you not?" he asked.

"There may be danger where I go," she said, calmly.

"Then do not expose yourself and leave me here in safety. Oh, allow me to go with you, to be ever ready to defend you with my life."

She shook her head sadly and said:

"No, no; it will be safer for both of us if you stay here. Do not move out unless compelled to." And she touched a secret spring, the great stone opened and she passed out.

Poor Harry sank back in his chair and buried his face in his hands. Would he ever see her again?

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WEALTHY STRANGER.

The disappearance of Jerry Blackman caused, as we have seen, considerable excitement. Not only the party which went out to hunt for him were anxious on account of the missing boy, but many others in the village.

Millbrook, as our readers will remember, was only a small, very insignificant little village, and one person taken from it would be missed more than ten thousand from some of our larger cities.

Besides Jerry's genial good nature and smiling face had won for him many friends among the villagers. He was fast becoming a favorite except to Jippy Jerkum, the little lawyer, who employed the most of his time in torturing his poor little mustache.

The great query among the most of the ladies of Millbrook was how Miss Martha Daily "would take it."

She seemed at first to take it pretty hard, kept herself shut up in her room at her hotel, and refused to see any one save her father. But in a few days she was out again and seen upon the street with Jippy Jerkum.

His face was red, his nose glowing like the door of a hot furnace, and he tortured and pulled his little mustache to a wonderful extent.

Jippy seemed happy; he was now in his glory. The dangerous rival was removed, and he had the beautiful girl all to himself.

Miss Martha smiled on him archly and turned his poor little head.

"It's a shame," said Mrs. Knowall to Mrs. Yellall. "To think just how the horrid creature did take on over that poor boy, pretending as if he was all the world to her, and that she would always be all the world to him."

"Yes, and now she's runnin' about with that Jippy."

"They do say that Jippy is not much."

"No, and if it wasn't for a brother he has, who is judge, he'd never amount to nothin'."

"I don't think she'll have him."

"I believe she will."

"Well, time'll show."

It did not take a very long time to show, for in three or four days a rich miner came to the village. He was on his way to the East, his former home, where his family still resided.

He was detained a few days at Millbrook, and stopped at the only tavern, kept by old Nathan Butts.

Here he met the dazzling beauty, Miss Martha Daily. Their meeting was quite natural, and to all appearances accidental.

There was but one dining-room in Butts' hotel, and, in fact, but two tables.

Ladies and gentlemen sat at them somewhat promiscuously. It was the first day at noon that he met her at the table, where he sat opposite her.

Mr. Duncan, the miner, was a married man, yet a great admirer of beauty. No sooner did he meet this fresh, beautiful face than he felt a thrill of pleasure. It was pleasure to behold her. He almost wished himself young and unmarried. But such thoughts were checked almost as soon as born in his mind. The thought was dangerous.

Yes, and the glance of those eyes was dangerous, but men love danger where there is beauty with it. Martha raised her eyes and accidentally met the gaze of the stranger.

Instantly they drooped and a flush suffused her cheeks.

Mr. Duncan was a man of the world, and he determined to know this lovely being.

As she arose to leave the dining-room she accidentally or artfully dropped her handkerchief, and the rich miner sprang to her side a moment after with the delicate little cambric in his hand.

"I beg your pardon, but you dropped this," he said.

She at first almost screamed, but recovered sufficiently to thank him, and looked embarrassed.

How he contrived to meet her and introduce himself, how they came to be familiar and to walk about the village together would not interest the reader. Mr. Duncan knew he was doing wrong, but then he declared, as men of the world do, that there was no harm in having a little sport.

Sometimes the vision of his little pale-faced wife and two children at home arose to his mind, but he banished them, determined to have a good time.

He thanked fortune that he had been detained at the village, and determined to lengthen his stay two weeks more, perhaps longer. His business was in a good condition, and he could cheat his wife out of a few days of his society to throw away upon a strange woman.

Jippy Jerkum was furious at this new turn of affairs. He walked the streets like an enraged tiger, raved and swore vengeance.

One evening Mr. Daily came suddenly into the village and went directly to the attorney's office.

There was a lengthy interview between Mr. Daily and the lawyer, after which Jippy became more calm.

He cast cold, jealous glances at the silver prince, but never offered Mr. Duncan any indignities.

In the meanwhile Mr. Duncan and Miss Martha were constantly together. They promenaded the streets of the village and even took short rambles.

The mining prince was not an old man. He was fast approaching middle age, handsome and gallant-appearing, and any lady might be proud to have him for a husband.

One pleasant afternoon they had strolled about the village, and at last took a seat upon a rude bench on the green hillside a few hundred yards above it.

The scenery was picturesque, if not grand, and the village lay like a miniature city beneath them.

"What large building is that upon the hill?" Mr. Duncan asked.

With a smile that was sweetness itself she answered:

"That is the Red House."

"The Red House?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why is it called that? Oh, I suppose, though, it's from the color of the stones out of which it is built."

"I suppose that is the reason."

"Who lives there?"

"No one."

"Strange; it's a valuable property, and not a mile from town either."

"But, sir——"

"What, Martha?"

"Oh, don't call me Martha," she said, blushing; "you are too familiar. Call me Miss Daily."

He laughed and said Martha was a sweet name, and he liked to call a sweet girl by it.

Again she blushed and hung her head.

"What were you going to say about the Red House?"

"It's haunted."

"Oh—is that so?"

"Reports say so."

"Do you believe it?"

"Yes; why not?"

"I thought so," said Mr. Duncan, laughing.

"Why do you laugh?"

"Because young girls are always ready to believe everything they hear, especially about ghosts."

"Well, some men are, too."

"I do not."

"I will venture to say you dare not go to the Red House."

"Who—me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"At the village they say it's more than one's life is worth to go near it."

"Well, I will go."

"I will wager you you won't."

"What will you wager?"

She paused as if studying up some trinket which she could put up as a wager, when a bold thought entered the mind of the silver king.

"I'll tell you what I'll wager," he said, laughing, laying his finger and thumb on a gold watch-charm studded with diamonds and sapphires. "I will wager this against a kiss from your lips, that I dare go to this Red House and explore it from cellar to garret."

A flush suffused the fair face of the pretty girl, and she accepted the wager.

"When shall I go?" he said, as if he was her slave.

"Now."

"And who will go along to see that I faithfully perform my part of the compact?"

She reflected a moment, and said:

"I will go myself."

"What, you dare the ghosts of the Red House?"

"Yes, in daylight—with—with you to protect me."

The last was said in a simpering, trusting manner, which seemed to increase the hunger of John Duncan for the promised kiss.

They started at once up the green hillside toward the Red House.

He helped her over the rough places, and once or twice his arm stole about her waist. She gently put him off and they continued their way to the Red House.

The great front door was still ajar, and they entered without difficulty. They found the house deserted, and the front part had already begun to show signs of decay.

There was a somber silence and awe-inspiring appearance about the house which seemed to chill the heart of the beholder at first sight.

A great owl flew out at the front door as they entered.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Mr. Duncan, "there goes your ghost."

"Wait, John Duncan, until you have explored this building, then if you don't find enough to curdle your blood, you can laugh," said Martha.

Her words were spoken in a sneering manner, and had a terrible hidden significance in their meaning. Mr. Duncan interpreting them quite harmlessly, said:

"For as sweet a kiss as I am to receive I would dare all the

ghosts and witches from the time of the witch of Endor to the present day."

"Do you think you would?" she asked, while a cold sneering smile came on that beautiful face.

"I would."

"You would think quite different if put to the test."

"No, I would not; but come, I am impatient for my kiss. Give it me now," and he held out his arms as if to clasp her in them.

"No, you have not earned it yet," she answered, drawing back.

It would be folly to say that John Duncan was in his sober senses. True, he had not been drinking, but there is other intoxication besides that produced by king alcohol.

"Why have I not earned it?" he asked, his face betraying his deep anxiety.

"Because," she answered, with a cruel smile which made her seem more beautiful than ever, "you were to search the house from cellar to attic."

"I will do it," he cried, his face burning with passion. "I would go through Hades to purchase one kiss from those lips."

"Come on, then," she answered with a smile which would have betrayed the fiend in her to one less infatuated; "earn it and you shall have it."

They reached the hall where the pictures hung and paused a moment to gaze on them, when suddenly Mr. Duncan felt himself sinking through the floor. He screamed and tried to spring from the platform on which he stood, but some one below held him fast.

He cast one look upward, and saw the painted faces on the canvas starting out, and the busts had arms which pointed deadly revolvers at him as he descended. Then, on the brink of the trapdoor, cold, cruel, yet more beautiful than ever, stood Martha Daily, a sweet, fiendish smile upon her triumphant face. The poor victim uttered a cry for mercy, but he was dragged down, down, down to those mysterious depths beneath.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE ROAD OUT.

The feeling of Harry Grinell can better be imagined than described. There was a sort of pride about him which made the idea somewhat repulsive that he should be dependent upon a woman, and she a young girl.

He did not the less admire the beautiful Nellie, who was hazarding her life for them. He almost loved her, if not quite.

But, then, why should he be forced to remain inactive while another, and above all, a girl, had gone forth to fight his battles?

"I am a coward," he said between his clenched teeth. "A miserable, contemptible coward. I remain here while she has gone, perhaps never to return."

Again he felt that wild impulse to sally forth and depend upon his own strength and ingenuity to escape.

"But no, I have been commanded to stay here, and promised to obey. I who came here determined to ferret out the murderers of old Sol Barksdale and the scoundrels who are counterfeiting, but I have made poor progress. Here I am compelled to lie on a cushioned sofa, while a girl has gone out to do the work. I ought to wear a petticoat."

We never feel so bad as when we come to realize our own insignificance. I sometimes think that a man can think more of himself than anybody else would dare to, and then when in his own mind the reaction comes on, he sinks in his own estimation many degrees below the ordinary level.

It was so with our hero.

His companion who had been reading, threw down the book and yawned.

"This is a bore," he said.

"What—the book?" asked Harry.

"No, this being cooped up here like a lot of chickens. I want to get out."

"So do I," though Harry, but he said nothing.

Jerry Blackman threw himself upon his back on the lounge and elevated his feet to a chair near. There was a short silence, during which Jerry whistled a tune. Then at last breaking out in his characteristic way, he said:

"By the way, Harry, did you know I have a sweetheart?"

"No; have you?"

"Yes; she's a daisy dipped in 'lasses."

"You are rather young, Jerry. Who is she?"

"Miss Martha Daily, at Millbrook."
 "The young lady at Butts' tavern?"
 "The same."
 "Yes. I noticed her when there. I think she is very beautiful."
 "Yes, you bet she is, and she's sweet on me."
 "She must be several years older than you."
 "Oh, not enough to hurt."
 "There is something in her face I do not like."
 "Oh, well, that's because you were jealous. I tell you, there are not many such girls in this country."
 "Had you no rivals?"
 "Rivals? Yes, red hot."
 "Who were they?"
 "Jippy Jerkum."
 "The lawyer?"
 "Yes, and he's a scamp."
 "I know that. Jippy is a bad man. He pretends to be honorable, upright and all that, when in reality he is a perfect knave."
 "Well, Jippy couldn't touch bottom when I was around."
 "That may have been all assumed."
 "Why, I guess I know," cried Jerry, a little hotly.
 "You may think you do. Young fellows in love don't know much," answered the young detective, coolly.
 "You had better be careful what you say, Harry Grinell. I guess I know what I'm talking about."
 "I am afraid you don't."
 "Well, what do you mean?"
 "I mean you had better let Martha Daily alone."
 "Do you dare breathe one word against her?"
 "No more than to advise you to have nothing whatever to do with her."
 "What is it your business?" cried Jerry hotly, springing to his feet and confronting Harry, who sat coolly before the enraged youth.
 "Nothing save that I have your welfare in mind."
 "Never mind my welfare," said Jerry; "I can take care of myself."
 "Not under the present excitement. Were I as rash and foolish as you, we would have a fight right here. What I have said is for your own good. The girl can be nothing to you, must never be anything. Let her go; that's what you will in the end be compelled to do."
 Jerry, with blazing eyes and flushed cheeks, confronted the young detective. Could he stand and thus tamely submit to his insinuations? Was it not his duty to engage in a brawl then and there? With a voice hoarse with passion the boy said:
 "Harry Grinell, do you intend to reflect in the least upon Miss Daily's character?"
 "I don't wish to reflect on anybody's character. There may be reasons why you should avoid this woman, and neither of them be a reflection on her. She may not be of a proper age for you, and she may be a confirmed coquette."
 Jerry was now considerably cooled down; he did not know why he had flown into such a passion with the companion of his perils.
 "Don't be uneasy, Harry?" said the boy, at last. "I am not gone yet."
 "I hope not," Harry answered.
 At this moment the mysterious being known as Nellie entered.
 "Get ready to go at once," she said.
 "Out of here?" asked Harry.
 "Yes."
 "Bully!" cried Jerry.
 All resentment, all angry feelings had for the moment passed away.
 "Is the way open to get out?" asked Harry Grinell, as he put on his hat and tightened the belt which held his pistols about his waist.
 "Yes."
 "Are they gone?"
 "I do not know where they are. I think by using due care you may be enabled to get out without being discovered."
 "We are ready."
 She opened the doors of a kind of secretary, the inside of which was lined with weapons.
 "Here, take all the weapons you need."
 "Is there likely to be a fight?" asked Jerry.
 "You are in danger."
 "Then I guess I might add a revolver or two to my armament."
 He took a Remington and Smith & Wesson improved.
 "Now I am all heeled," said the jolly boy, as ready for a

fight as he would have been for a frolic on the play-ground about the school-house.
 "I must exact a promise from both of you," said Nellie.
 "What is it?" asked Harry.
 "That you will under all circumstances be controlled by me."
 "We agree to that," they answered.
 "Do not become so impulsive. Don't be so quick to become excited, and so rash in attacking——"
 "In other words," Jerry interrupted, with a merry twinkle in his eye, "you mean not to fly off the handle."
 A smile came over the sweet face, as the girl responded:
 "That expression may convey my meaning to you. I hope it does. At any rate, be cool and patient."
 "We understand," said Harry. "Lead on."
 "Follow."
 She went to a door which opened by the aid of a spring. They glided out noiselessly, and passed down a long corridor, where they came to one of those peculiarly constructed doors. Nellie carried in her hand a small dark-lantern. She first placed her ear close to the wall and listened. There was no sound whatever.
 Then she withdrew the cap of a small telephone and listened. It was a most powerful instrument, and she could have heard any one breathing had they been in the outside passage.
 Convinced at last that the coast was clear, she touched the spring and let the great stone door glide away.
 "Come," she whispered, and the trio passed into a large corridor.
 She led them some distance along it, when suddenly she paused to listen.
 "Some one is coming," she whispered. "This way, quick."
 Seizing an arm of each, she drew them with her into a small grotto leading from the main subterranean passage.
 Here they waited for some moments, when they heard the footsteps of a man go cautiously by.
 When he was gone, Nellie and her companions issued from their hiding-place and resumed their journey.
 After numerous windings and turns, passing a hundred small grottoes and corridors, they came to a peculiar flight of stone steps, leading to a cavern above. They ascended these, and were seemingly in a vault.
 From here they climbed still further above, by means of an Indian ladder.
 "A moment more, and you will be free," whispered their beautiful guide, leading the boys hastily along, holding to the hands of each.
 Suddenly she told them to stop, and crept forward to reconnoiter.
 Was it possible that some new danger would yet arise to thwart their prospects for liberty?
 The prisoners were now well convinced that had their escape depended on themselves they would not have succeeded.
 A few moments' anxious waiting and then their fair guide came back to them.
 The way was clear, she said, and they followed her to where a small ladder went up out of the earth.
 "The trapdoor is removed," the girl whispered. "Go on out."
 Harry went first, holding a cocked pistol. Soon he saw the stars shining in the heavens; but they were not out yet.

CHAPTER XXIV.
 THE NIGHT ATTACK.

In chapter nineteen we left Mr. Larkmore's party, who had set out to find the missing boy encamped and a strange personage about to introduce himself to them.
 This strange personage, whom the reader has before seen as Tiger Jane, is now in male attire, and looks not a little like a backwoods hunter.
 Arising slowly from the crouching position he had assumed, with his rifle-barrel in the hollow of his left arm, he said:
 "Yes, I'll introduce myself. It may be they'll need my help afore they get out o' these woods."
 Going cautiously forward until he was within a few feet of the camp-fire, which was now blazing brightly, he paused, counted the men about the fire and then, taking another step, said:
 "Good evenin' to ye!"
 Mr. Larkmore and his band of hunters started and looked behind them.
 There stood a strange hunter, coolly leaning on the muzzle

of his rifle, while his active jaws plied rapidly on the huge cud of tobacco in his mouth.

Mr. Larkmore, perhaps the most cool of any of the others, took one step forward, and said:

"Who are you?"

"Waal, stranger, I swow ye put 'em purty straightforad," said the hunter. "But I likes to see things come straightforad 'ceptin' Injun arrers——"

"But you are not answering my question," said Mr. Larkmore. "Who are you?"

"Oh, well, as to that, I mought be a dozen persons, but I ain't but one now, leastways."

"Well, who is that one, sir?"

"I'm sometimes called Wildcat Tom. I kinder like that handle, and if it's agreeable to ye, would jest as soon be lifted around by it as not."

"Are we near what's called the enchanted forest?" asked Nick Blumer.

"Right at the edge o' it."

"By thunder, let's move off," said Nick.

"No, I reckon ye're safe here," said the hunter.

"Where are you going to-night?" asked Mr. Larkmore.

"I swow, stranger, I don't know exactly. Nowhere in particular."

"Can you be persuaded to stay with us?"

"Waal, now, I mought, an' then, ag'in, perhaps I moughtn't. It all depends upon the sperit in which ye ax me to stay."

"Well, sir, we do not know what sort of a spirit will induce you to stay; if we did, we would try to work ourselves up to it," began Mr. Larkmore.

"That'll do, stranger, ye needn't ax any more. I'm goin' to stay wi' ye, cos it's not allus nice, ye know, to sleep out by yerself."

At supper their strange guest insisted on supplying himself.

Supper over, in reply to anxious questions, the mysterious hunter suggested that guards be appointed, as there might be danger from "Injuns"—with a peculiar accent on the word.

This was done, but Wildcat Tom was himself on the qui vive.

It was near midnight, and the sleepy sentry had squatted down at the root of the tree, where he sat dozing. He did not hear the faint rustle of the leaves in the distance and see the cautious approach of several objects.

But one did.

"Crack!" sharp and shrill on the night air rang out the rifle shot.

In an instant every man was on his feet.

"Tree, tree, or ye're a dead nigger," cried the voice of Wildcat Tom.

A volley of rifle shots and a chorus of yells answered. One of their party sprang to his feet to be pierced by a bullet, and fell to rise no more.

"What does it mean?" cried Mr. Larkmore, dragging the bewildered and stupefied Henry behind a tree.

The crack of rifles and pistols now rang out lively, and Wildcat Tom threw some dead bushes on the fire. It blazed up, revealing fitting forms not far away.

"Dad gast 'em, I knew it," he cried. "But they shall hev enough o' it."

CHAPTER XXV.

MR. DUNCAN'S FATE.

Like some beautiful demon Martha Daily stood on the verge of the trap down which the rich millionaire was descending.

Her face, sweet as an angel's, yet possessed that bitter sweetness known to the most deadly poisons.

A mocking laugh went out on the air as he sank down, down, down from the world above to a world of horror, misery and death beneath.

All was darkness and despair around and below him.

"Heaven have mercy upon me!" he groaned.

He now saw his folly, as all men do; saw it when too late. He thought of his home, his wife and children, the fortune he had amassed for them.

How like an angel seemed the face of his wife when compared to the beautiful demon who had brought ruin and death upon him.

He found that his feet and legs had been caught in some kind of a rope netting, which held them fast.

At last the elevator to which he was fastened stopped.

A red light exhibited some horribly grotesque figures standing about him. Some had the masks of demons and some of animals.

"Remove him," said a deep voice, and half a dozen pairs of hands grasped the wretched man.

"Oh, don't, don't, don't!" he cried, with all the pathos a human voice can contain when life is at stake. "Spare, oh, spare my life!"

"Hush up, you cowardly fool," said a deep, grim voice.

"I will not, unless you promise me my life. Take all I have, but spare my life."

"Yell if you want to. We frequently silence men by thrusting a gag of red-hot iron down their throats."

"Oh, what have I done to you?" Mr. Duncan began.

"Nothing," answered the deep, guttural voice at his side, "and if you are wise you will do nothing."

"But why am I brought here?"

"You will know," was the answer, by the same commanding voice. "Bring him on."

The man had been lifted from the platform to a sort of car and the trapdoor shot back in its place.

Mr. Duncan was now in almost total darkness. The car on which he was placed seemed to have several other persons beside himself on it. Doubtless the guard which had him in charge.

It moved away down by some wonderful unseen engine and seemed rolling through a tunnel.

Suddenly a light could be seen. As they approached it it proved to be two lamps which two grotesque figures held. They were masked and disguised as devils, and as they stood there so awful with the full red glare of the lamps falling upon them he could well believe them demons.

Their lamps lit up the five figures on the car with him, and he found them as grotesque and terrible as those sentries in the dark passage.

The car rolled on, on and on, evidently drawn by some unseen power, and the soul of the prisoner was filled with horror. At last it paused and he was removed from it.

"What shall we do with him, King?" asked one.

"Put him in the stone cell," was the answer.

There was a pale, whitish light about them—a kind of phosphorescent glow or halo, which always surrounds the ghastly.

Suddenly the light became brilliant, seeming to burst out from two glass balls suspended above them.

The poor man was trembling like an aspen.

One of his grotesque guards motioned him to follow him; but he stood as if he had suddenly been turned to stone. Again and again was he motioned to move on, but he seemed immovable.

Mr. Duncan was dragged, pushed and kicked forward until he was at the door of a cell, into which he was forced.

Here everything was of stone. The walls, the flooring, the ceiling overhead, and all was stone, just as if this apartment had been cut out of a solid rock.

There was a rude bench of stone running around the side of the apartment, on which was some straw and a buffalo robe.

This was to furnish him a chair, a bed and table.

"Oh, Heaven help me!" ejaculated Mr. Duncan, as he threw himself upon this strange couch. "When, how and where is all this to end?"

He lay there for many hours, harassed with doubts and tortured with fears. His brain was racked and his conscience kept pricking him as if it were a sharp-pointed needle.

"I have brought my own fate upon my head. Heaven grant that my family may never know how I have done it. A shameful death awaits me, ruin and disgrace."

He tossed about on his rude bed for several hours, and finally fell asleep. How long he had slept he did not know. It might have been hours, and then it might only have been a few moments.

He was awakened by some one rudely shaking his shoulder.

"You must come with me."

He now saw that the figure had a miner's lamp in his hat, which only lent a horror to his grotesque disguise.

"I—I—I'll go—y-y-y-es, I'll go," stammered Mr. Duncan.

The man in leopard-skin coat, with a leopard's head on for a mask, was truly a frightful object.

"Do not hesitate, man," said the terrible guard; "follow me if you do not wish to die a horrible death."

The frightened miner accompanied the goblin guard into an apartment, where he was stripped to the waist.

Then he was conducted to another room, which was brilliantly lighted.

Upon a dais or raised platform sat the man disguised as king of beasts. He held a trident for a scepter in his hand, while around him, standing, reclining, sitting or squatting were figures the most grotesque and horrible his eyes had ever beheld.

There were monkeys, muskrats; there were tigers, alligators

and one horrible turtle-faced demon; all were armed with spears, battle-axes, swords and revolvers. Some were disguised as knights and some as demons and fabulous monsters.

Mr. Duncan groaned.

"Place him in the seat!" roared this strange king of beasts.

The wealthy miner was placed in an armchair facing the king.

"Who are you?" asked the chief, as a secretary or clerk at his side opened a large book.

"John Duncan."

"We will have no lying now, sir."

"I understand," said Mr. Duncan.

"Is John Duncan your real name?"

"Yes."

"What is your business?"

"A miner."

"A miner—day workman or speculator?"

"Speculator—a mine owner."

"That's well for you; see now that you tell the truth all the way through."

"I am telling the truth."

"How much money have you with you?"

"About four hundred dollars."

"How much are you worth?"

"I do not exactly know."

"Approximate then?"

"Well, fifty thousand."

"Where is your nearest bank?"

"Denver."

"Good. How much have you there?"

"About fifteen thousand dollars."

There was a moment's silence, during which the clerk seemed to be writing.

"Come forward."

The trembling man arose and advanced.

"Sign this," and a check for fifteen thousand dollars was laid before him.

"What! and beggar my family?"

"Sign it, sir!"

It was given to blank.

"I will not do it!" said Mr. Duncan.

"Then you will die!"

"Die it is, then. I know my life would not be worth a moment's purchase if I did sign it."

"Sign, sir. I say sign!" cried the exasperated outlaw.

"Never!"

"Bind him. Take him back to the torture!"

It was useless. His feet were burnt with hot irons, a red-hot rod thrust in his mouth, and his tongue parched and burned.

"Take him off to the whipping-post," cried the chief.

An hour later Mr. Duncan was brought back just alive from torture.

But he was one of those persons whom a near approach to death only makes the more stoical.

"Will you sign?" asked the chief.

He shook his head.

"Sign, and you shall have life and liberty at once."

Again he shook his head.

"You still refuse?"

Unable to speak, he nodded.

"Then away to the sink with him," cried the exasperated king.

The tortured and bleeding victim was lifted up by four guards. They bore him to the sink, where he was plunged in, and sank never to rise again.

Just as they re-entered the council chamber to report what they had done, two forms ran by, which were Harry Grinell and Jerry Blackman, whose escape we have described.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE STRANGE GUIDE.

Mr. Larkmore's party were but illy prepared for the attack made upon them. There was a natural, superstitious terror attached to the mysterious foe.

Wildcat Tom's act in throwing brushwood upon the smoldering fire had had a good effect. In fact it saved the party from total defeat.

As the flames darted upward they revealed those flitting forms to the frontiersmen.

"Injuns, by thunder!" cried Nick Blumer. No one expected

Indians in that part of the country, or nearer than a hundred miles, yet it was possible that the hostile foes might make a forced march through the woods, dodging the towns, settlements and forts to attack this out-of-the-way village or party of hunters.

At the cry of Indians the men once more became calm. They were accustomed to fighting the redskins, and at once settled themselves down to business.

"Give 'em thunder!" roared Nick Blumer, firing at a top-knot about forty yards away and knocking a piece of bark off the side of the tree where it had been.

"Lay low, and take it easy!" shouted Wildcat Tom.

Crack! went his rifle, and there was a death-cry not the least like an Indian, and a body sprang up from the hazels and fell.

Crack! crack! crack! sounded the shots on the night air, keeping the woods almost ablaze with fire and shots.

But few of them took effect, save upon the trees and bushes, which were getting pretty well shattered.

There were several lulls in the attack, and our friends thought the enemy had gone off, but they had only adopted another plan or stratagem.

Mr. Larkmore shook his head.

They were not Indians. Indians would be more impulsive, would not hang on so long or fight so stubbornly.

Their enemies had a few of the peculiar characteristics of Indians, but not many. They yelled less and exposed themselves less often than even the most experienced braves would have done.

So far two of their own men were either killed or badly wounded, and lay within the circle of light thrown out by the fire.

Two or three of the attacking party had fallen.

The lion of the fight was Wildcat Tom. He had thrown himself upon the ground and wormed his way along a hazel thicket until he came up against a stump.

"Now, dot rot yer fool souls!" he yelled, as he drew a bead on the side of the head of a painted demon, "ye needn't be playin' Injun about me."

He pulled the trigger and the man dropped.

It became evident to the attacking party that they were having more of a fight than they had bargained for.

In a few minutes they began to be more wary in their manner of attack, and at last they ceased to respond to the shots fired at them.

Not a soul was in sight, and Mr. Larkmore ordered his hot-headed men to quit firing, as there was nothing to shoot at. They waited and listened.

There came a peculiar whistle, and then a moment after first one and then another of those strange foes who had fallen in the fight began gliding away.

This was certainly unaccountably strange. They could hardly comprehend it at first; but a few moments later the more keen-eyed of the defenders saw long lariats extending from a neck of one, a foot of another and the arm of a third into the bushes.

These were doubtless the instruments which were taking them off. They could only watch this process, which was certainly Indian-like.

Slowly inch by inch the dead were worked away into the forest, and finally disappeared altogether.

An hour passed and all was silent. Not a leaf rustled the boughs of the trees; only the groan of one of their own men—a poor fellow shot through the body—broke the silence.

To these men who little anticipated a fight, it was a matter of horror. In times of peace to be attacked by somebody they did not know, and at a time when they did not expect to find a body of foes anywhere, was enough to utterly confuse them.

Another hour of silence and waiting, and then they became more bold. First a few whispered words went round, and then some one spoke aloud.

The ice was broken, and all felt that nameless dread leaving them rapidly.

"I am going to see how bad Tom Lofton is hurt, boys," said Mr. Larkmore, stepping out from behind his tree. "Stay back there, Henry," he added, as his impulsive son stepped out to follow him.

He expected that his own appearance, within the circle of the fire-light, would bring about his ears a dozen rifle shots.

But not a shot was fired. They had left, without a doubt.

Mr. Larkmore reached Tom Lofton's side and raised him up. He was mortally wounded and dying.

The others now stepped out, and the irrepressible Henry, who had been left back as long as he could stand it, now hurried out.

"We must thank Wildcat Tom for escaping a general mas-

sacre," said Mr. Larkmore. "Had he not warned us, we would all have been asleep."

"Where is Wildcat Tom?" asked another.

"Tom, Tom, Wildcat Tom!" called one, but there was no response.

"Well," said Mr. Larkmore at last, "there is no need to discuss that question any longer. He is gone."

"What are we goin' to do?" asked Nick Blumer.

Nick had a bullet wound on the cheek, which had knocked him down, and at first made him think he was killed. It was only a flesh wound, however, and he knew he would soon be over it.

"We must try and get Tom to Millbrook if possible," said Mr. Larkmore.

"But, by jemany, who kin find the way in this darkness?"

Simmons, one of their scouts, had been killed.

A bullet had struck him in the centre of the forehead, and he died instantly.

Gilstrap, the remaining scout, was but very little acquainted with the country.

He had a pistol shot in his arm, but was not wholly disabled.

It was a serious question about finding their way back to Millbrook on this dark night.

"Come, fix up litters, and let us be going," said Mr. Larkmore. "We must carry these wounded men by turns."

They soon had two rude stretchers made with poles and bark, and started through the woods in the direction they supposed Millbrook to lie.

The dead scout Simmons could have told them, had he been alive, whether they were on the right path or not; but he could not direct them now. His tongue was silent forever, and his body nearing its last resting-place.

They had traveled three or four miles when they halted.

"I am afraid we are lost," said Mr. Larkmore. "Do any of you know where our town lies?"

Some said it was in one direction and some in another. It was evident that all were at fault.

"Come this way, gentlemen, I will be your guide to Millbrook," said a sweet, clear voice, and the next moment, to their astonishment, a young girl, dressed in fine, though strong goods, with thick-soled shoes, stepped out from the bushes.

"Who are you?" asked Mr. Larkmore, astounded.

"I am to be your guide to Millbrook, and I will lead you safely, too."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MISSING MAN.

Harry Grinell was almost at the opening when he paused, as we have said in a former chapter. Already the dark sky and waving tree-tops were visible.

Jerry Blackman was but a few feet below him, and he had turned to see if their deliverer would follow them, when he caught her warning:

"Get up quick and run for your lives! You are discovered. Look out when you get above, for the woods are full of those demons."

"Are you not coming?"

"No, no; go on."

Being thus urged the two climbed further up until they came out in an old well standing in the woods.

Not knowing where they were the young men waited for what seemed to them hours. A warning cry they once heard was not repeated, but they could certainly hear the faint sounds of footfalls.

Finally Harry Grinell arose to his feet and listened. Jerry did the same. All was still, save the sighing wind among the tree-tops. The night was very dark.

"There is some mystery about this Dead Man's Bluff which has not yet been solved," said Harry.

"You are mighty right. There is a very dark mystery about the whole thing; and there is a mystery about that girl, too."

"Yes; she is the greatest mystery of all."

"You may well say that, Harry," said Jerry, after a few moments' silence. "She is as pretty as an angel, as brave as a lion, shrewd as a Yankee and deep as a philosopher."

"I certainly have a very exalted opinion of her."

"And I—I could love her," said Jerry, "if it wasn't for Martha Daily."

"You are too young to be seriously in love," said Harry.

"You may think you know something of the world; but what has your world been? Outside of a few months' holiday

it has been spent altogether in a school or college. What you learn there fits you for the world, but the great lessons of life are to be learned from the world itself. Young fellows fall in love with girls younger or older than themselves as the whim may be. They know little or nothing about themselves, and sometimes in less than a month are more anxious to tumble out of love than they ever were to fall in."

No longer superstitious himself concerning the horrors of the Red House, Jerry had to admit that it would require but little aid of the imagination to clothe the demons with all the supernatural terror which was given them by the good citizens round about Millbrook.

They courted the idea of superstition. There was no doubt but these monsters, when deprived of their masks, came above ground and associated with the good citizens of Millbrook. Had the people of Millbrook known who they were they would beyond doubt have been astonished to know that they were some of them their own neighbors.

The fugitives had been moving through the woods with the utmost care. There were fallen trees to fall over, there were large stones to stumble against and treacherous pits in the earth.

As near as they could estimate from a reasonable standpoint, they had been above ground about four hours, though Jerry Blackman said he was willing to take his "Bible oath" it was ten, when they heard the sound of footsteps in advance of them.

Soon they were near enough for our friends to see that one of the men in advance carried a torch. They were running directly toward the concealed men.

"Harry," said Jerry, quickly, "I'll be hanged if that ain't Nellie, our girl, who is leading that party."

When the party of hunters, guided by the mysterious Nellie, came opposite our friends, a form sprang out behind them with a cry of joy, and they were confronted by the missing man for whom they had searched so long.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DESCENDING.

"Jerry—Jerry Blackman," cried Henry Larkmore in wild surprise.

The little party halted with the dead and wounded brought from the late fight.

"Come on, come on," urged the fair and mysterious guide. But no one heard her, or hearing, heeded her request. All were too much absorbed in what Jerry had to say of his adventures.

"Did you git through 'em alive, Jerry?" Nick Blumer asked.

"No; I was turned to a stone. A great oblong stone. I was a stone a long time, I don't exactly know how long, but moss began to grow out over me."

"But, Jerry, how did ye git back to flesh and blood?" asked Nick Blumer.

"Come on, come on, if you value your lives," said Nellie.

But they were now absorbed with Jerry, and paid no heed to the frantic entreaties of their beautiful guide.

"This man," said Jerry, pointing to Harry Grinell, "he broke the spell of enchantment and freed me from the stone into which I was turned."

Henry Larkmore, who thought Jerry only joking, said:

"Well, Jerry, what kind of a stone did you make?"

"Well, as near as I can remember," said Jerry, "from the partial view I had of myself, I was a kind of a brown stone. I looked rather new, you know, at first, but I expect I would have been moss-grown if I had waited long enough."

Nellie now went to Harry, and, plucking at his sleeve, drew him aside.

"You are a detective?" she said.

"Yes," was his answer.

"And you came here to arrest counterfeiters, and the murderer of old Solomon Barksdale?"

"That is my business, miss, as I have told you."

"Do you want to do that work at once?"

"Of course—the sooner the fiends are under lock and key, the better."

"Well, I know this, that these masked men of Dead Man's Bluff are now in their council chamber in the catacombs. They have met a severe defeat, and are in consultation as to what they shall do. Their chief is mortally wounded, and Jay Gormley, the detective, hermit, female huntress and a dozen other mysterious personages he sometimes assumes to be, is now waiting for us about a mile further on. Rouse those men

up to action. Lead them on to battle. They are equal in number to the outlaws, and we can effect a most complete surprise."

"Oh, yes; I will do so," said Harry.

Then going to where the excited inhabitants of Millbrook stood conversing in a most excited manner, he said:

"Gentlemen, give me your attention a moment, please."

He spoke in a tone somewhat superior, and so commanding that the hubbub almost instantly ceased, and the men gave him their respectful attention.

"Gentlemen and lawful citizens of Millbrook, I have a few words to say to you, and then to request you as lawful citizens to aid us in crushing out of existence one of the most terrible dens of infamy we have ever known.

"I will state to you in the beginning that the Red House is not haunted, as many of you believe, neither is the forest enchanted; but both are made dangerous by a gang of bandits who have long been a curse, not so much to this community as to the entire West. This has been their receptacle for stolen goods, and their mints are here, where they coin base money. We can break up that den in one short hour. Will you do it?"

All agreed to do so.

"Come on, I will lead you," said Nellie.

"Then lead on!" cried Nick Blumer, slapping his rifle with his hand. "I'll be danged if I can't go anywhere that a woman'll lead!"

"There will be danger," said Nellie, with her sweet, warning voice. "Those who follow me need not expect a path of roses. Blood will flow."

The whole manner of the girl was changed; she seemed totally different from her former self, at least so she appeared to Harry.

There was less of caution, less of care. What did it mean? Why was she advancing through the forest with that burning torch? Suddenly there loomed up before them a form.

It was the form of a man.

Harry grasped his revolver and had cocked it when the fair guide said:

"Do not be alarmed; it's a friend."

The tall, dark form of a man stood perfectly erect and held a rifle in his hand, while at his waist was a belt bristling with revolvers.

"Wildcat Tom," said Nick Blumer, as the light from the torch fell upon his face.

"Jay Gormley," said Harry Grinell.

"But I'll be hanged if it ain't that old woman I had a fight with over the deer," put in Jerry Blackman.

"Follow as quickly as you can," said Gormley, and he descended into the earth at the spot where our friends had made their exit.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DEMONS SURPRISED.

Since Martha Daily had led Mr. Duncan, the rich miner, to his ruin she had been without a lover—if we except the egotistical little lawyer who occasionally paid his addresses to her, when she saw fit to see him.

Jippy, on the night in which the events occurred as related in our last chapter, dressed in his best and made his way to the hotel of Nathan Butts.

Miss Martha was very agreeable to the lawyer on this evening—as a country girl once said, "If she couldn't get biscuit she would take cornbread." If Jerry Blackman was gone, and there was no rich miner to flirt with, she would pay her attention to the young lawyer.

The evening passed off quite happily to the young folks in the little parlor.

Jippy arose to go home, and had half made up his mind to venture to kiss this lovely being before him, when the door burst open and a singular being entered. It was a man painted and dressed as an Indian warrior.

A few hurried words, and he left unobserved.

There was a cry of grief, and Martha Daily almost fainted in Jippy's arms. But she recovered herself shortly after, and, hastily putting on her cloak and hat, hurried away, leaning on Jippy's arm, to the Red House.

* * * * *

And now we again invite the reader into that council chamber where Mr. Duncan was put to death so cruelly, and where Harry Grinell came so near losing his life.

The demons are there once more, and a terrible sight they present. They are dressed in all their strange gewgaws and

masks, and are grouped about in the strangely-lighted apartment.

Some recline on couches, some on sofas and some sit in chairs.

There is a dark form lying on a cot. The heavy breathing tells that the dark life within is ebbing away.

A dead hush is about the apartment, broken only by the heavy breathing and an occasional groan.

In the corner, lying side by side, are three stark, stiff forms. The masks are still upon their faces, but their stiffness and ghastly appearance indicate that they are dead.

The remaining members of that mysterious band—who, in their strange war-paint, half Indian costume and half demon attire, look more grotesque than ever—are gathered about like frightened children.

The dark form on the cot has on the mask of a lion. He is their king, the centre figure of their great organization for the perpetration of crimes too heinous to be recorded.

He is dying.

One of the men mounted the rostrum in front of the chair and said:

"Our king is now expiring. It is the last of him, and our organization is in disorder. The tiger is, next to the lion, king of beasts; let him come forward to the chair."

The tiger-man did so, then waved his hands above his head and said:

"Friends and comrades, it has become my duty, under the most painful circumstances, to assume control of our organization——"

The door burst open, and Martha Daily and Jippy Jerkum entered.

"Where is he—oh, Heaven, where is he?" cried Martha Daily.

Her instinct and natural affection guided her to the spot where the man lay groaning and bleeding his life away.

"There is one amidst us whose face is not covered," said the man with the dog's face.

"Lead him forth and let him mask," said he of the tiger head.

Two men instantly seized Jippy and led him from the apartment. In a few minutes those two men who had gone out with Jippy returned, accompanied by a man disguised as a hyena.

In the meanwhile the beautiful Martha Daily had been wringing her hands and weeping violently over the prostrate form of the dying lion.

The man was sinking rapidly, and if he recognized her at all he was unable to speak.

"Oh, take off this horrid mask," the girl cried. "Let me look at the face of my father before it has become cold in death."

"No, no, maiden," said the tiger. "Do you not know that no face can be unmasked in these underground apartments?"

"Father, father, father!" and she fell upon her knees by the side of the prostrate man. "He is dying, oh, he is dying, and without a hope. Father, father, our lives have been wicked, and we cannot hope for anything good in the future," said Martha.

She dared not breathe the name of God or His precious abode—Heaven. Such names were too pure and sacred to be spoken by such polluted lips.

The tiger-man turned his great blazing eyes upon her, and said:

"Such expressions are improper. Let us hear no more of them."

At this moment the sentry uttered a wild cry.

"What was it?" cried one of the demons.

"Aye, go and see," said the chief.

A man sprang to the door, when it was burst open and the person we have known as Tiger Jane and Wildcat Tom, who was in reality none other than the detective Jay Gormley, sprang in, followed by Harry Grinell, Jerry Blackman, Mr. Larkmore and others.

"Surrender!" thundered Gormley, "surrender or die!"

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

The surprise of the demons was complete. They were all within the council chamber and the game fairly bagged.

Jerry Blackman recognized among them the old man who had directed him in the enchanted forest, also the demon who had aided in his torture in the stone room.

Suddenly the man with the tiger's face sprang from his seat on the dais, and cried:

"Let us die with the harness on. All is up now, and it is either hang, be shot or cut our way through."

He fired his pistol at Gormley as he spoke, and led the charge at the front door.

Gormley fired his pistol and the man with a tiger's face fell.

The demons fired a volley of shots and Jerry Blackman and Harry Larkmore were both wounded, and Neil Otis and another man killed.

"Give 'em thunder," shouted Gormley, and the deadly guns and pistols belched forth their contents among the enemy in front of them.

The stone floor was strewn with writhing and struggling wretches.

One cowardly rascal, disguised in a hyena's mask, a mask which well became him, was on his knees in a corner of the apartment imploring mercy.

But no mercy was given; he was shot through and lay kicking, writhing and struggling upon the ground.

The fight was soon over.

The masked brotherhood of bandits fought until all were killed.

The apartment was filled with smoke, and when it finally crept out at the open doors, Harry Grinell was shocked to see a young woman lying across the body of one of the masked men.

He uttered a cry of horror and raised her up.

She was dead. A bullet had found a lodgment in her heart. Yet in her face the features of the cold, wicked Martha Daily were plainly visible.

The shot which killed her was evidently fired by one of the masked men, who wished their secrets to die with them.

"Now," said Jay Gormley, "we have cleared up the mystery of the Red House and of Dead Man's Bluff, or about done it, let us unmask the dead, and then I want you all to hear a story connected with this mystery."

First the mask was removed from the lion, and underneath it was seen the features of Mr. Lem Daily. No one was very much astonished at this, but there were surprises in store for them.

The next was the tiger, and all uttered exclamations of wonder at recognizing in him Nathan Butts, the landlord.

Harry Grinell unmasked the hyena, and all saw the dead features of Jippy Jerkum, his red face pale once more.

Next came the wolf, which was a neighboring farmer, Colonel Krepps; then the dog, which proved to be the ex-postmaster, old Dave Popper. The cat proved to be a carpenter known as Phil Marks. There were demons, goblins and monsters, some of which were strange and some of which were easily recognizable.

When they had exposed all the villains, Jay Gormley had a guard placed over the dead, and told the others to follow him.

He conducted them to a neat apartment where the wounded lay undergoing treatment by the village doctor, whom they were surprised to see there. He was assisted by that strange and mysterious, but angelically beautifully being, Nellie, and she it was who brought him to the scene.

The last bandage had been applied, and the last bullet extracted as they entered.

"Now find seats," said the detective, taking a seat near the centre of the room. "We have just broken up one of the worst dens of murderers ever known, and about whom there was a dangerous air of mystery."

The men sitting or standing about were awed and stupefied.

"Now, gentlemen, you may think it is I who have done this, but I did not. You may think it was this man," pointing to Harry Grinell, "but he would tell you he did very little of it. The person whom you have to thank, and who can tell a tale

of horror and mystery, is this young girl," and he pointed to Nellie.

None of the villagers had ever seen her before. At the urgent request of Jay Gormley, she gave the following account of herself and her relation to the robbers:

"My name is Nellie Oakland, and my parents have been dead for years. My former home was in Chillicothe, Ohio. My grandfather was Solomon Barksdale, former proprietor of this house and these lands, and my mother's father. About a year and a half ago he came to Chillicothe for me. I did not know that my grandfather was engaged in the unlawful business of counterfeiting until I came here. He brought me to this house in the night, and I saw no one and no one saw me. Then he told me that he had an organized band of counterfeiters under him, and feared they would kill him. He said they wanted to add murder and robbery to their business, but he refused. There was great danger of their taking his life. He told me all about this red house. It had been erected over this natural cavern or caverns many years before, when people hid from the Indians in the catacombs beneath. He used a part of the lower grottoes for molding money. The men always wore masks of animals or demons, so as not to see each other's faces, and one could not testify to another."

"My grandfather always having an impression that his band would betray him, had secret doors, grottoes, passages and apartments, which the others did not know. He was a scientist and mechanic. He arranged these white lights out of electricity, and constructed telephones, so that he might hear his men in conversation. All of this he informed me. I tried to get him to quit violating the law, and he had consented when he was killed by his men because he would not make a murderers' den out of the place. The men knew nothing of me. I started to fly, and in the woods met this man, dressed as a woman, and told him all. Then he laid the plans; I assisted in the execution, and all have been brought to justice. I am not strong enough to tell all the horrors I have witnessed here, a part of which you know."

* * * * *

Reader, why need we prolong the story? The mystery is cleared up. Jerry and Henry both recovered, and are in college, fast friends. Both are engaged to beautiful ladies, and will be married on their return. As for Jay Gormley, he is still a detective, and the wonder of the West.

Harry Grinell is out of the business. He married Nellie Oakland, as everybody has supposed he would, and she objected to one she loved following such a dangerous calling, and he is now a dry goods merchant, and a happy husband and father.

The village of Millbrook is prosperous and happy, and glad that there is no more dread attached to the Red House, and that the mystery of Dead Man's Bluff has been cleared up.

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